

EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

Thesis/Project

**“WHEN THE LION BEFRIENDS THE LAMB”:
EMPOWERMENT OF YORUBA WOMEN IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY**

BY

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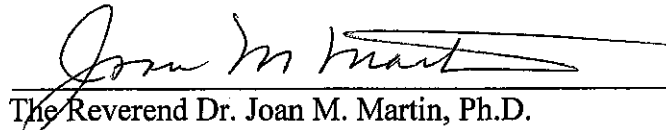
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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of patriarchal values on women and the Yoruba Christian community. While being male is not supposed to be evil, male privileges and patriarchal structures as reinforced by both Christianity and Yoruba culture have continued to dehumanize women. Although the Yoruba culture is being overshadowed by Christianity, its advent has not removed men from the apex of power; in fact, it has sacralized it. The Yoruba community believes that men's domination is God's will, and that the ancestors and the Orisas (Yoruba gods) agree. Men are the power holders, while women exist at the mercy of the male-dominated ontology.

By examining the cosmology of the Yorubas and Yoruba traditional religion, I clarify that Olodumare, the Yoruba God, does not approve women's oppression. By reexamining the biblical creation story, I argue against the portrayal of women as the suffering, weaker and subordinate helpers to men. While total demolition of patriarchal structure would be ideal for women's emancipation, Africans', especially the Yorubas', cultural value for community and family life, which places men as the protectors and heads of families, makes total deconstruction of patriarchal concepts difficult. Although underappreciated, communal African values also identify women as nurturers and preservers of life and community, especially in terms of feminine wisdom and reproductive power. Therefore, the central premise of this thesis is that respect for women and men must be rethought and re-envisioned in new, mutual dialogical relationships with the liberating dimensions of African traditional religions and Christian faith.

Since family and community carry the ontological meaning of being African and since the present Yoruba community has been influenced by Christianity and its values, I employed a methodology of in-depth analysis of traditional African religions and theological understandings of being male and female to adequately understand God's vision of marriage for the Yoruba community. I claim that women and men can be empowered for equal human dignity within the social structure of Yoruba Christian life, using the biblical metaphor of God's peaceful kingdom where "the lion and lamb" can become friends (Isaiah 11:6ff). The ground for this paradigm shift is what I term a Third Space Christology, a liminal space which brings both men and women together for contemplation, reasoning, discernment and dialogue. The thesis project fosters the goal of The Voice's vision – To know and be known.

DEDICATION

This Thesis Project is dedicated to my mother,
Mrs. Abigail Adefuye Sowale

&

My wife,
Comfort Oluwafunmilayo Sowale

And to several other women around the globe, my sisters, my mother-in-law, friends,
daughters in the faith, who have continued to nourish and trust me with their wisdom
and experiences.

May you all live long to eat the fruits of your labor and be fulfilled in your calling as
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INTRODUCTION

“It’s a boy!” In Yoruba culture, when a woman gives birth to a boy, the jubilation and celebration of such a woman and her baby is immense compared to the birth of a girl. This phrase suggests some privileges of being born male, and sets the genesis of women’s oppression in Yoruba culture. Although the present Yoruba culture is being overshadowed by Christianity, its advent has not removed men from the apex of power—in fact, it has sacralized it. The Yoruba community as it exists today believes that men’s domination is God’s will, and that the ancestors and the Orisas (gods among the Yoruba) agree—men are the power holders, while women exist at the mercy of the male-dominated ontology. I stand to object to this notion by saying it was not so from the beginning even within Yoruba cosmology.

This thesis contends this notion and addresses the possibility and necessity of equal human dignity within the Yoruba Christian context which at the present is characterized by male dominance in both traditional and Christian spheres. The central premise of this thesis is that respect for women and men must be rethought and re-envisioned in new, mutual dialogical relationships of the liberating dimensions of African traditional religions and Christian faith. Family and community connection is seen to carry the ontological meaning of being African. Since the present Yoruba community has been influenced by Christianity and its values, empowerment in this context will require an in-depth analysis of traditional African religion(s), and scriptural and theological understandings of being male and female in order to adequately understand God’s vision of marriage for the Yoruba community.

I am putting forward the claim that women and men can be empowered for equal human dignity within the social structure of Yoruba Christian life, using the biblical metaphor of God's peaceful kingdom, where "the lion and lamb" can become friends (Isaiah 11:6ff).

As a male born and nurtured within the Yoruba Christian community and as an eye-witness of the societal imbalance and abuse of such male privileges, I am using this thesis to give a voice to my personal passion and calling to challenge every assumption, every oppressive customary law and practice, and every advantage that I have as a male and make it life-giving. Moreover, professionally, my social location as a man, a husband, a father of sons, and a minister has deeply motivated me to consider gender respect and equal human dignity to be a pressing issue which must be urgently addressed in Christian ethics and theology through sustained study and the writing of this thesis.

This thesis is critical and has as much to do with dismantling oppressive patriarchy as with the liberation of women from men's oppression. Although patriarchy has turned to become evil, I will contend that maleness was not meant to be evil. What we have come to know as patriarchy was originally meant to be a calling of men to accountability, responsibility, right use of authority and cooperative stewardship alongside women in the building of God's kingdom. This is demonstrated in the instructions given to Adam and Eve: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (Genesis 1:28).

Thus Jesus, refuting oppressive patriarchy, said to his disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave” (Matthew 20:25-27).

Examining the contention and justification of the possibility for an alternative to oppressive patriarchy is necessary considering my context of ministry within the Yoruba Christian community. For Africans, especially the Yorubas, cultural value for community and family connection is so vital to the extent that it forms the whole essence of being a Yoruba. Ideally what needs to happen is to find a way of preserving the African family structure and at the same time doing away with abuse of patriarchal power. If this vital issue is not addressed in a timely manner, I foresee a total breakdown of the most valued African family structure.

The premise of this respect and equal human dignity between women and men has led to my deep desire to research, critique and examine some of the assumptions of Christian religion and Yoruba cultural norms which continue to oppress women. For clarity and limitations, Chapter One focuses on the definition of the social context and the role of women within it. I open the chapter with a story of the Happiness Machine, a story written by Joseph Barndt. Although Barndt is speaking about racism in America, I begin this thesis with this story because it metaphorically describes the situation of family life as experienced by men and women in Yoruba culture. I describe the pre-colonial Yoruba community, their religious traditions, and the significance of Ifa divination. I

discuss the position of women and how marriage, patriarchy, roles and responsibility have influenced women's place. I explore what liberation, freedom and empowerment mean in the Nigerian Yoruba context for women and men. I also introduce my concepts and ideology of third space Christology and the theology of uniqueness. I conclude the chapter by reclaiming the gift of authority as an option for the right use of male privileges.

In Chapter Two, I tell a personal story which led to my passion for this project. Using my family as a case study, I highlight the plight of Nigerian women, and a Yoruba Christian woman in particular. I also reveal the universality of women's oppression by sharing another story I encountered with an oppressed woman in the United States. I expound on the present situation of Nigerian women and the predicaments around infertility. This chapter also deals with the questions of God and religious influence on women, including issues around divorce. The question raised by this project has also placed my understanding of African culture in transition. While I cannot place all parts of Yoruba Christian society under a microscope in this thesis, I evaluate how marriage in my culture needs to be transformed. An effective liberation theology in an African context will need a thorough epistemology of African cosmology. Understanding the origin of gender dynamics within the cosmology of the Yorubas will reveal that Olodumare (God) has never supported women's oppression. In order to do this, I track the place of women in the cosmology of the Yoruba ethnic group and the goddesses of the Yoruba pantheon. I critique and examine some of the assumptions of Christian religion and Yoruba cultural norms which have continued to oppress women.

Chapter Three is devoted to analyzing the various forms of oppression. Consulting different authors such as Kwok Pui-lan and Letty Russell, I investigate the concept of liberation theology and the hope it offers for women's empowerment in the Yoruba Christian community. The word "liberation" is often used to connote the emancipation of the oppressed. However, my encounter with Paulo Freire has transformed my understanding. Freire is a Brazilian author whose social location and childhood experience of poverty and hunger influenced him to live the rest of his life for the empowerment of the poor. Freire is popularly known for his work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasizing a new relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. Freire's work gave me the awareness that deep down in the heart of the oppressors is also a cry for liberation from the personality and structures of oppression; therefore in this thesis, I seek not only the empowerment of the oppressed but also the liberation of the oppressor. I make a case for women's empowerment by juxtaposing human rights with the concept of the human being made in the image of God. In this chapter, I consider the voice of African women theologians such as Amba Mercy Oduyoye, Olajubu Oyeronke, Musimbi Kanyoro, and Isabel Apawo Phiri, and their perspectives on women's oppression and empowerment. How can inculturation or enculturation and cultural hermeneutics of gender respect and equality influence African society? I conclude the chapter with an emphasis on the crucial need for scripture and biblical hermeneutics.

In Chapter Four I present an in-depth Christological framework of liberation and salvation. I propose an indigenized Christological voice within the Yoruba religious views, which is able to speak to men and women in the Yoruba society. I discuss the

effect of the dichotomy between the three religions in Nigeria, i.e., traditional religion, Christianity and Islam, and how certain common ground permeates through all of humanity irrespective of our differences. This is where I grapple with the concept of a “third-space Christology.” The idea is that the metaphorical use of the term “Third World” conveys a “Third Space” in which new ideas can be formulated. I close the chapter by introducing the person and works of Jesus as the true source of liberation where the lion and the lamb (the oppressors and the oppressed) can both reside without fear.

In the conclusion, Chapter Five, I present practical ways in which both the oppressed and the oppressors can be liberated from this oppressive patriarchal system through a proposed project called “The Voice,” a vision that has been in my heart for twenty years. *The Voice* is a vision of a safe space where a “Third Space Christology” can emerge, a space where equal human dignity can be envisioned as true life stories are shared and claimed in all their glory and blemishes. *The Voice* vision is based on the mandate in Isaiah 40:3-4,

A voice of one calling in the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be
raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall
become level, the rugged places a plain.¹

The goal of “The Voice” is to create a balance between strength and weakness, which will enable indigenous women and men to both reclaim voices that have been suppressed and become aware of the voices that have suppressed them. This will be achieved through dialogue, seminars, workshops, interactive online tools, and telephone

¹ Isaiah 40:3-4: All biblical quotations come from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

services. The target populations for this project are married and unmarried women and men, single mothers and fathers, and young adults within the Yoruba community, all of whom are in need of essential mutual support systems. This support will take many forms including prayers, connections to services and resources, storytelling, faith sharing, debriefings, thoughts and feeling processing, personal evaluations, developing self-awareness, and boosting of self-esteem. The greatest strategy of this project is to listen for the unsaid and perhaps identify a space for mutual blessings, gifts and liability of both the oppressed and the oppressors; this will restore equal human dignity to the community.

To do this, there is a need to understand the context in which this voice emerges. In this study, that context is Yoruba in Nigeria, which is influenced by four perspectives—traditional religion, Christianity, Islam and the advent of liberation theology. For the scope of this thesis project, I will limit myself to Christianity and Yoruba traditional religion.

I commit this work to the blessings of God and the wholeness of God's creation everywhere.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT: THE YORUBA PEOPLE OF NIGERIA

“Omo onile te e jeje, ajoji te e wuru wuru”

While the indigenes of a place tread very gently on it,
the stranger treads very roughly.

Once upon a time there was a kingdom of people who pursued happiness. Nothing was more important to them than being happy. The happier they became, the happier they wanted to be. The source of the people's happiness was a magic Happiness Machine. Whenever the people felt unhappy they would pour their troubled feelings into the Happiness Machine. The magic machine would melt their feelings down and purify them. The residue of their troubles became dross, and the dross was drained away and dumped into a distant part of the kingdom. The people would take their purified feelings and go away singing and feeling happy again. The years and centuries went by, and the happy people became happier and happier because of the wonderful effects of the Happiness Machine.

There was only one problem. Another group of people lived in a distant part of the kingdom where all the dross was dumped. The dross made them very unhappy. And the more dross that was dumped, the unhappier they became. Unfortunately, these poor, unhappy people were not permitted to use the Happiness Machine, because the one thing the magic machine could not do was purify its own dross.

The unhappy people complained to the happy people about the problems they had with the dross. But the happy people ignored their complaints. When they were confronted with the terrible results of their happiness, these happy people simply took their troubled feelings to the Happiness Machine and it made them happy again. It was easy to believe that it was not the dross of their own troubles that made other people unhappy. Rather, they convinced themselves that the unhappy people were just incurably unhappy and that they had nobody but themselves to blame for their unhappiness.

It was not long before the unhappy people began to protest more insistently about their situation. They organized marches and demonstrations. They demanded that the dross be removed from their part of the kingdom. And they demanded a fair share of happiness for their people. But the happy people turned a deaf ear to their protests, which

only served to make the unhappy people angrier, and they protested all the more.

Finally, the happy people could no longer ignore the protests. They used force to put down the protesters, and arrested and jailed the leaders. They passed laws and organized a military force to control the unhappy people. Many of the unhappy people were killed. This only made the others angrier and more unhappy. They began to plot and plan how they could destroy the Happiness Machine.

The conflict and tension caused a severe drain on the happy people's happiness. In addition to everything else, many of them were becoming uneasy about the way the unhappy people were being treated. All these new troubles made the Happiness Machine work even harder, and consequently, even more dross was produced. They had to build an even bigger and better Happiness Machine to take care of the happiness needs of the people; consequently, the dross was piled higher and higher and spread farther and farther into other parts of the kingdom, which made more and more people unhappy and angry. It was not long before the unhappy people were in a constant state of rebellion.

Then a new and even greater danger arose. The Happiness Machine became so large and productive that there was no place on earth left to put the dross. The piles of dross crept closer and closer to the homes of the happy people and the place where the Happiness Machine was operating. Now the happy people were threatened not only by the rebellion of the unhappy people, but also by their own Happiness Machine.

The new danger caused even greater internal conflict and tension among the happy people. Some wanted to build an even bigger Happiness Machine in order to deal with the crisis they were facing. Others began to see that the Happiness Machine was not the solution to their problems, but the cause. They wanted to reduce the size of the machine, or even dismantle it altogether. Some even began to wish that they could join together with the unhappy people to find solutions to the problem and build a new society together.²

According to Joseph Barndt, the end of this story has not yet been written.

Although this story seeks to address the injustices associated with racism in America, it applies to the oppression of women in patriarchal societies in the world and in the Yoruba culture in particular.

² Joseph R. Barndt, *Dismantling Racism: The Continuing Challenge to White America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), 1-3.

As clearly articulated in the introduction, my attempt in this thesis project is to write the conclusion of the story for the Yoruba Christian culture. Through this study, readers are invited to address women's oppression in a male-controlled society. From the above story, men are the "happy" people while women are the "unhappy." The cultural and religious happiness machine empowers men at the expense of women. In the following section, I attempt to define and locate the social, cultural and religious setting of the Yoruba community culture in which female oppression thrives.

The Yorubas

This project is focused on the Yorubas, an ethnic group found in some countries of West Africa, most especially in Nigeria. The Yorubas, according to the postcolonial web source, is "one of the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria."³ The Yorubas are predominantly established in the southern part of Nigeria with *Ile Ife* (Ife city) as its epicenter. While northern Nigeria is predominantly Islamic and the middle east is chiefly Christian, southern Nigerian is a mixture of both Islamic and Christian religions. The Yorubas, who now have an approximate population of 40 million,⁴ claim "*Ile Ife* city as the original home place (*ile*) from where they all moved to the various places they live today."⁵ Thus Jacob K. Olupona, a Harvard Divinity School professor of African religious tradition, who specializes in African and African American Studies described *Ile Ife* as a sacred space which must be revered especially as it applies to the ontological

³Matthew DeFusco, "The Yoruba," <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/nigeria/yorubamf.html> (accessed July 21, 2014).

⁴ Jacob K. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 22.

⁵ Ibid.

concept of the Yorubas.⁶ This point explains the Yoruba ancestral proverbs which say, “*Omo onile te e jeje, ajoji te e wuru wuru*” (while the indigenes of a place tread very gently on it, the stranger treads very roughly).⁷

The Yorubas believe that they are the descendants of *Oduduwa*, who in the Yoruba cosmology is the deity whom *Olodumare* (God) sent to create the earth.⁸ The pre-colonial Yorubas practiced traditional religion; however, most modern Yorubas are now Christians or Muslims. In addition, some Yorubas who practice traditional religion have continued to retain their beliefs.⁹

The Yorubas are very rich in culture, traditions and religious life. Pre-modern Yorubas lived in towns and settlements and most of these towns were built around farmlands. The market place was usually located in front of the king's palace at the center of the town.¹⁰ Yoruba towns were founded by the Baale (father of the land), who in turn was named king. The king is the religious and political leader of the town.¹¹ One of the most important jobs of the king is to defend his people against any form of invaders: therefore “it is the king's job to name the chiefs; Otun, the "right hand man", and Balogun, the War Chief.”¹² Because of his highly elevated position and responsibility of defending, consulting and mediating between the people and gods of the land, “the king was considered a sacred person, like a living god, he could not be seen or spoken to

⁶ Ibid., 22-23.

⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁸ DeFusco, *The Yoruba*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

directly, he also could not eat in public.”¹³ Yoruba kings are assumed to never die; when they physically pass away, they are expected to simply pass on their crown to the next generation who is the heir to the throne.¹⁴

In the pre-modern Yoruba society, a king had to be a warrior, and a defender of territory and rights of the community. The king has to be both spiritually and physically strong and since women have been considered weak, the kinship family requires a male child called “*Arole*” to keep the throne. An *Arole*, the first male child, is expected to succeed his father as the heir. The Yorubas believe that a family without an *Arole* (a male child) is soon subjected to being forgotten since the females will eventually marry and take the names of their future husband. Thus, the Yorubas can be described as a “patriarchal society”—that is, it is centered on males, who are qualified to be the head of their lineage.

Although Yoruba kingship is absolutely reserved for men, there have been cases where women have had to play the role of the heir. For instance, there have been exceptions where a family has had no *Arole* and the female has had to step up into this position. According to Oyeronke Olajubu, a Nigerian Yoruba feminist scholar who specializes in Yoruba women’s empowerment, the explanation for exceptions to exclusive male rule is recorded in the sayings such as, *Bi o ni di obirin kije ku molu* (Kumolu),¹⁵ “If there is no special reason, a woman would not be named Kumolu.”¹⁶

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵ In Yoruba cultural idiom and practice, Kumolu is a name signifying that the family of the female so named has no male heir apparent, because all the male children have died.

¹⁶ Oyeronke Olajubu, “Seeing through a Woman’s Eye: Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 1 (Spring, 2004), 43.

Kumolu according to Olajubu is a special name given to a woman who performs feats, especially physical ones; such women are described as *obinrin bi okunrin*, “a woman like a man.”¹⁷ Yoruba women who became powerful goddesses like Moremi, Osun, Oya etc. will be in this category.

The Yoruba kingship and patriarchal tradition were reinforced by the two religions—Christianity and Islam—and all three view women as inferior to men. However, it is important to note that the advent of Islam and Christianity robbed exceptional Yoruba women of their influence; these are women who were goddesses and warriors just like men. In the process of conversion from Yoruba religion, the dominant patriarchal nature of both Islam and Christianity and their distorted teachings unfortunately endorse oppressive patriarchy; hence, the exceptional gender empowering roles of Yoruba women were driven underground. Women were totally and ultimately relegated to the position of wives, home-makers and child bearers.

As exemplified by both Christianity and Islam, only men were allowed to be mediators between God and the people and so women were put in lower positions. I will be explaining the impact of this transition on Yoruba women in Chapter Two.

Yoruba Traditional Religion

Before the advent of Islam and Christianity, the Yorubas practiced the worship of Olodumare (God) through divination and the veneration of the Yoruba deities called the

¹⁷ Ibid.

Orisas.¹⁸ The Orisas are mostly male deities (gods) with few female goddesses whose power and importance are often downplayed by men. The advent of Islamic and Christian religion introduced a different dynamic which unfortunately put a seal on the already prejudiced Yoruba patriarchal rule, and taught that women must be submissive to men's rule. However, the role of women in the original Yoruba traditional religion cannot be underestimated.¹⁹ In her argument against a notion that gender was a Western paradigm,²⁰ Olajubu validates the notion of gender and the importance of women in the Yoruba cosmology. In her book *Seeing through a Woman's Eye: Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations*, Olajubu painstakingly explains the leadership roles and influence of two powerful women who became Yoruba goddesses. The first is Osun (the Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power, and Femininity), who in her time and through her prowess influenced women and the general Yoruba community. Osun is said to possess a special power that can heal diseases and infertility. Through her feminine power, Osun was said to be a great leader of all women, and because women manage the marketplace, Osun was indirectly in charge of the then Yoruba community. Another powerful goddess like Osun is Oya (the goddess of wind and storms). These are just two of many other powerful women, who in their own generation demonstrated that women can play other roles aside from mothers and wives. This underscores the importance of women both in the religious and domestic affairs of the Yoruba traditional society. In fact, the valuing of women and goddesses is still celebrated today. For instance, in the book *The City of 201*

¹⁸ Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, 282.

¹⁹ Olajubu, *Seeing through a Woman's Eye: Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations*, 42.

²⁰ Ibid.

Gods, Jacob Olupona gave a recent narrative description on the celebration of the Olojo festival in Ile Ife where the cosmological narrative and sacrificial life of the Yoruba pantheon including Oduduwa, Osun, Moremi and her son Oluorogbo, to mention just a few, were reenacted.

The part that really resonates with my thesis on women's empowerment is the narrative of Moremi. This narrative shows Yoruba men's ideology and the unequal power dynamics between the goddess and other gods. Olupona dealt justly with the unequal power relation between males and females in the Yoruba traditional culture as exemplified in the case of the conquest of Ile-Ife's enemies solely demonstrated in Moremi's story and the subsequent sacrifice of her only son, Oluorogbo. Olupona emphasized that despite her heroism, Moremi was not accorded the type of glory that would have been given to men who have achieved the liberation of their people.²¹ Instead, her victorious and sacrificial achievement was represented chiefly by her sexual prowess and her conduct as a seducer.²² Although the myth of Moremi was described by Olupona as second only to the story of the world being created after the great struggle between Oduduwa and Obatala²³ and that Ile-Ife traditions considered Moremi the most celebrated goddess, the traditional power preference of male over female can still be observed. For example, this can be seen in the narrative reenacted during the celebration of the Edi festival where the Yekere (male) the chief priest representing Oluorogbo (the

²¹ Olupona, *City of 201 Gods : Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, 209.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 206.

son of Moremi) tries to usurp the place and position of Eri (female) the chief priestess representing Moremi.²⁴

It is not surprising to see the same power dynamics in Yoruba homes and society today, where men are claiming supremacy over women despite heroism displayed by women. For instance, Yoruba men and husbands will claim or take the credit for all the achievement of their wives. Yoruba women and wives are blamed for every misfortune of their husband, for example infertility. Fathers will claim the ownership of a child even when the child might have been single-handedly raised by the mother.

Ifa Divination

Divination according to P.J. Heather arises from the human desire to know what is going to happen; it is the human search for knowledge through such means as astrology, augury, omens, prophecy, lots, ordeals, dreams and visions.²⁵ In the Yoruba traditional religion, Ifa divination is the means of this search. According to Olupona, Ifa, the representative of Olodumare, manages the spiritual and social affairs of Yoruba society.²⁶ The Yorubas believe that the physical world (Aye) is being controlled by the spiritual world (Orun) and to ensure the peacefulness and co-existence of the inhabitants in the physical cosmos, a negotiation of power and mediation between the forces in Aye and Orun must be well coordinated. The means of doing this is through Ifa divination. Therefore, the Yorubas consult Ifa on a wide range of personal, social, and religious

²⁴ Ibid., 209.

²⁵ P. J. Heather, "Divination," *Folklore* 65, no. 1 (Apr., 1954), 10.

²⁶ Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, 174.

matters, before undertaking an important obligation such as marriage or in situations of serious illness, especially when the illness is prolonged.²⁷ Ifa will reveal the source or the cause of the problem and will recommend the process to be taken in order for healing and wholeness to be restored. In most cases, Ifa will recommend reconciliation between individuals or groups in conflict culminating in the giving and receiving of forgiveness and prayers for healing.

The origin and importance of Ifa divination was emphasized by Olupona in the *City of 201 Gods*. Olupona explained that in traditional and contemporary Yoruba culture and society, the Ifa divination system occupies a vital role in ordering and regulating the social and moral order. The Yorubas believe in the authenticity and authority of Ifa. Thus Olupona recorded a typical invocation of Ifa divination process:

Atiwaye ojo
Atiwo oorun
M'a fi ire pebi
M'a fi ibi pe ire
Mafofola fohun
Iwaju opon
Eyin opon
Olubu lotun-un
Olumoran losi
Aaarin opon
Ode orun

From the dawn of the day,
To the setting of the sun,
Never say it is evil when the message is good!
Never say it is good when the message is evil!
Never speak deceitfully as a ventriloquist!
The front of the divining board,
The back of the divining board,
The right side of the divining board,

²⁷ Ibid.177.

The all-knowing on the left,
The center of the divining,
The center of heaven.²⁸

This moral character of Ifa divination especially as it applies to women's empowerment and the equality of men and women was revealed in the creation narrative called "The Myth of Osun"—discussed in detail in the following chapter—where the male deities conspired against the only female deity Osun.

Ifa revealed how Olodumare (God) instructed the male deities to go back and reconcile with Osun; only then could they be successful in their plan. Thus Ifa refutes oppressive patriarchy, contrary to Yoruba men's ideology that women should be considered as second class and should not be involved in important matters. Actually, this narrative reveals the possibility of an alternative to patriarchy in which both men and women can work together for a better and life giving society. Unfortunately, the present situation of Nigerian Yoruba women is far from this reality.

Women in the African Yoruba Culture: Marriage

Africans have many diverse cultural practices, a survey of which would be too large for the scope of this thesis project; hence I will limit my discourse to practices around Christian marriage and family life, and their effect on women in the African Yoruba context. I agree with Constance R. Banzikiza that "the African traditional social pattern which provided close communal living, traditional rites and rituals, societal customs and life education, and which thereby made it possible for young people to live a

²⁸ Ibid., 175.

moral life before marriage, has disintegrated.”²⁹ However, I would add that these traditions and customs have always placed more restrictions on girls than boys. One case of discrepancy in marriage value is the requirement of virginity for females while there is none for males.

For African female adolescents, their pride is to be a virgin until marriage; this physical virginity in girls until marriage is a highly valued virtue in Africa, and affects the honor not only of the adolescent in question but also of her family. J.S. Mbiti, quoted by Banzikiza, described this view of virginity: “The blood of virginity is the symbol that life has been preserved, that the spring of life has not already been flowing wastefully, and that both the girl and her relatives have preserved the sanctity of human reproduction; only marriage may shed this sacred blood.”³⁰ Mbiti said further that, “virginity symbolizes purity not only of the body but also of moral life; and a virgin bride is the greatest glory and crown to her parents, husband and relatives.”³¹ To the extent that this symbolism is accepted, young men and their families always take pride in marrying a virgin girl even if the groom might have been the cause of loss of virginity for several other girls prior to his marriage. On the wedding night, if a bride is found to not be a virgin, she will be cast out and sent packing back to her family. This woman may be ostracized by society and even by the members of her own family. However, the groom’s virginity does not even matter. This inequality is one of the many examples of the oppressive patriarchal preference of Yoruba men, especially in marriage.

²⁹Constance R. Banzikiza, "Juvenile Pregnancies: An Acute Problem in Africa Today," *AFER* 38, no. 1 (02, 1996), 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Marriage in Postcolonial Yoruba Culture

From the African perspective, marriage is not just between two people, i.e. groom and bride. It is an affair that involves the combining of families, and sometimes even two communities. The extended family plays a major role in the decision of whom to marry, because tracing the ancestry of the two people involved insures that there is no relational tie. It is also an attempt to investigate whether or not there is any fertility-related or hereditary disease, flaw or crisis in or between the ancestries of the two families. Any such discovery may lead to termination of the union. I will be saying more on this in Chapter Two.

Moreover, for African women, divorce is not an acceptable cultural option. An unmarried African woman is viewed as irresponsible and arrogant even by other women and her own family members. Aguilar confirmed that most social outcasts in Africa are divorced women, single women, and unwed mothers.³² Barren women and women who have married Muslim husbands are terribly afraid of being divorced because this will mean being abandoned and the children taken by the families of their husbands.³³ Given all these unethical and socio-economic challenges facing married women in Nigeria, “What then is the purpose of marriage?” If such a burden is placed on women but not on men, what should the appropriate roles for women and men be to promote a more just power for women? Answering this type of question in a context which places so much value on marriage and community life will require the wisdom of treading ‘softly but

³² Mario I. Aguilar, *Ministry to Social & Religious Outcasts in Africa* (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1995), 91.

³³ Ibid.

firmly³⁴ as Mercy Oduyoye suggested. It will require step by step listening and the deconstructions of men's cultural and religious assumptions. It will require a deep understanding of what patriarchy is all about and perhaps find an alternative to the patriarchal concept.

Patriarchy

What is patriarchy? Rita-Lou Clarke, a feminist theologian, states that both scientists and psychologists working in the field of battered women are in agreement in their view of patriarchy and its effect on wife abuse.³⁵ According to Guenther Haas, a professor of Christian ethics and systematic theology, patriarchy can be defined in morally neutral terms as simply the rule of man—men over women, and husbands over wives and children³⁶—however, Haas remarks that feminists do not see patriarchy as neutral, and their definitions reflects this.³⁷ For instance, Letha Darwin Scanzoni, a Christian feminist and independent author who specializes in the intersection between religion and social issues, has equated patriarchy with sexism, saying “the systematic oppression of women is considered to be one of the oldest expressions of original sin.”³⁸ Mary van Leeuwen, a social and cross cultural psychologist whose research works includes the psychology of gender also states that “Patriarchy as a male pyramid of graded subordination and exploitations specifies women's oppression in terms of the

³⁴ Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, “Treading Softly but Firmly.” In *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 1.

³⁵ Rita-Lou Clarke, *Pastoral Care of Battered Women* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 22-23.

³⁶ Guenther Haas, "Patriarchy as an Evil that God Tolerated: Analysis and Implications for the Authority of Scripture," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38, no. 3 (09, 1995), 321.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

class, race, country, or religion of the men to whom they belong, it points to the sociopolitical mechanisms creating and sustaining the oppression of women.”³⁹ Further, Rosemary Ruether, an American feminist and Catholic theologian, also argues that “patriarchy as the whole structure of father-ruled society reinforces not merely the subordination of females by males but also the oppression of all weak and marginalized groups by the rich and powerful.”⁴⁰

Thus considering these definitions of patriarchy, one will conclude that patriarchy is the major sin that is at the root of all systems of oppression and in this case, oppression of women. However, while contemplating and wondering about what Yoruba women’s empowerment will look like, Deniz Kandiyoti, an author who specializes in gender relations and developmental politics offers me an epiphany which reminds me of a Yoruba adage which says “*Bi a se nse nibiyi eewo ibomi*,” (Our conduct here is anathema to practices elsewhere).⁴¹ This according to Olajubu also suggests the dynamic nature of culture as well as its variableness.⁴² In her work *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, Kandiyoti argues that, of all the concepts generated by contemporary feminist theory, “

Patriarchy is probably the most overused and, in some respects, the most undertheorized. This state of affairs is not due to neglect, since there is a substantial volume of writing on the question, but rather to the specific conditions of development of contemporary feminist usages of the term. While radical feminists encouraged a very liberal usage, to apply to virtually any form or instance of male domination, socialist feminists have mainly restricted themselves to analyzing the relationships between patriarchy and class under capitalism. As a result, the term patriarchy often evokes an overly monolithic conception of male dominance, which is treated at a level of abstraction that obfuscates rather than reveals the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Olajubu, *Seeing through a Woman's Eye: Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations*, 41.

⁴² Ibid.

intimate inner workings of culturally and historically distinct arrangements between the genders.⁴³

Kandiyoti proposes “an important and relatively neglected point of entry for the identification of different forms of patriarchy through an analysis of women's strategies in dealing with them.”⁴⁴ While I am not in agreement with Kandiyoti's entire thesis, her caution of over generalizing and her claim of the possibility for varied forms of patriarchy deserve attention. There is a danger to assume that what constitutes patriarchy in the United States is universally acceptable, which is not. Patriarchy is a social construct; hence its expressions may differ from culture to culture.

Generally, African men are threatened by social theories that tend to emphasize individualism at the expense of the community. “I am, therefore we are” rather than “I am therefore I think,” is the African ontology of being. In this regard, authentic women liberation should avoid duplicating the evils of patriarchy—rather it should have equality of men and women—something that Yoruba traditional culture and religion sought to do as its goal.

In his book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire warns that the oppressed in the struggle for humanization must be careful not to become another

⁴³ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2, no. 3, Special Issue to Honor Jessie Bernard (Sep., 1988), 274. Undertheorized in this means not dealing enough with paradoxes of gender and patriarchy being related forms of oppression, patriarchy as one form and gender itself constitution another form of oppression relationally through practical ideologies of politics, economics, and the non-unitary nature of households in which women bargain with patriarchy with its constraints. For details on how Kandiyoti's analysis has developed, see "Gender, Power and Contestation. 'Rethinking Bargaining with Patriarchy'." *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender, Analysis and Policy*, edited by Cecile Jackson and Ruth Pearson. London, England, Routledge, 1998. 135-151.

- See more at: <http://www.popline.org/node/531244#sthash.9SIu7CD8.dpuf> archy."

⁴⁴ Ibid., 275.

oppressor.⁴⁵ Freire remarked on the possibility of the marginalized to have lost their self-esteem in the process of being oppressed, therefore the tendency to have submerged their innate talent.⁴⁶ Freire lamented that the oppressed once empowered can easily become like their oppressors,⁴⁷ that is, “the oppressed structure of thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped.”⁴⁸ He argues that “a true perception of themselves is impaired in the reality of oppression;”⁴⁹ “rather than discovering their innate abilities, they also struggle to become oppressors or sub-oppressors.”⁵⁰

Using this analogy of Freire and in order to avoid a situation where women begin to define their freedom in terms of men’s oppression, thereby losing touch with the discovering of their innate ability, I am inclined to think deeply about a different model for women’s empowerment which does not necessarily contend for sameness with men. Rather I would like to examine the gifts and the liabilities of male and female privileges especially as it affects women in various stages of life particularly for the Yoruba community. Although patriarchy has been oppressive and evil, I stand to propose a different ideology of how male privileges can be life-giving and liberating—when used in the struggle for women empowerment. In other words, how can men use their powers to challenge and dismantle patriarchy?

⁴⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [Pedagogia do oprimido.], 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 28.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 29-30.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

As noted above, it is important to be aware that among the Yoruba and within Christian religion, patriarchy became evil due to distortions of sacred stories that endorse oppressive male-privilege and advantage. Christianity was portrayed as anti-women at many levels. Although God created them male and female in God's own image (Genesis 1), and both men and women are apparent recipients of God's redemptive works through Christ Jesus, women in Christianity have been victims of patriarchal control.

For instance, both the Old and New Testaments justify the fact that "woman" was the cause of the original sin and the fall of the human race. Concerning women, here is the commandment from the letter of Paul to Timothy, "a woman should learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." (1Timothy 2:11-14). This is one example of many scriptural passages which have been literarily interpreted and used to oppress women.

Particular to the African context, patriarchy was given credence by the Christian colonialism of Western Europe. In fact, British colonialism in the 18th and 19th century specifically projected the Victorian view of women as properties of their husbands as a view held by civilized nations. Laws required that women take up their husbands' names as well as denied women the right to own property. Sadly, these factors direct how women are currently viewed and treated. In the pre-colonial Yoruba culture, the sudden death of a husband resulted in the wife being remarried to one of her husband's brothers and their property being claimed by her husband's family. Women who refused to be

claimed or remarried in this manner were subjected to societal abuse or ostracized and stigmatized as disobedient women. This is one of the many ways in which patriarchy has been used to dehumanize women in this culture.

Unfortunately, this Victorian view and the pre-colonial patriarchal Yoruba culture were sacralized by Christianity and still influence contemporary Nigerian women and their ecclesial roles in the church. For instance, in the Church of Nigerian Anglican Communion, women's ordination remains a disputed topic. Unfortunately, the majority of women in the Church of Nigeria also opposed women's ordination. Informed by the Christian colonialism of Western Europe and supported by the oppressive patriarchal Yoruba culture, women are viewed as unqualified to be priests or leaders of church communities. Questions arise such as, how will nursing mothers manage the leadership of church or how can a woman pronounce the absolution of sin over a man? Or how will a husband's job be affected when his wife who is now a priest is transferred from one parish to another? Unfortunately, most of these questions have never been an issue for a priest's wife who has to sacrifice her life and her career for the benefit and success of her husband's priestly career. Ironically, since women have internalized their roles as child bearers, nurturers and home makers, most Nigerian Anglican women object to women's ordination. These women agree with most men that the woman's role is to be obedient to the husband and to take care of the church just as she takes care of the home.

All these issues confirm the many traditional assumptions about Yoruba women and Christian teachings. These assumptions are viewed as the sacred standard for women in the Yoruba culture. In this regard, the assumptions are now viewed as the norm

sanctioned by God and Olodumare—making women’s liberation an act of disobedience against these sacred beings. To critique the idea of viewing women’s liberation as an act of disobedience, an in-depth understanding of men’s and women’s roles and responsibilities within Christian religion and Yoruba cultural norms is needed.

Roles and Responsibilities; Theology of Uniqueness

My theological understanding of the concept of equality is that God did not create an equal world; rather he has made distinctions between each of his creatures. For instance, the creation narratives in Genesis have God creating the light before anything else, but we also know that darkness preceded the light. What God did was not to eradicate the darkness, but to distinguish between the light and the darkness; he called the light day, and the darkness, he called night (Gen. 1:3-5). This was the beginning of God’s ordering. It may be argued that yes, God made the distinction, but there was no superiority or hierarchy between the two. All things being equal, distinction does not imply oppression. However, God established difference as a way of distinguishing one creature from another (Genesis 1; 2). It is tempting to understand the order of the creation account in Genesis as indicating superiority or hierarchy. Arguably, this ordering and division emphasizes purpose and the interconnected of creation as opposed to superiority or inferiority.

From God’s perspective, every creature is unique but has intrinsic value, substance and purpose. Among human beings, as we see in Genesis 2:16-24, the biblical definition and view of the relationship and role of man and woman began with the

ordinances of marriage.⁵¹ Louis Brighton, a Concordia Seminary professor of New Testament exegetical theology affirms that the basic parameter by which the Bible describes the relationship between a man and a woman is marriage, because it views marriage as being of divine origin, and not an evolutionary discovery of man.⁵²

Although the issue of headship remains problematic, headship in a marital relationship as biblically defined is on the basis of responsibility rather than superiority or subordination. Paul explained his argument about the role relationships of men and women in terms of headship by placing it in the hierarchy of headships: “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3). By doing this, he has established the propriety of headship by appealing to the relationship of Christ to man and God to Christ, and at the same time has shown that such headship is not antithetical to one’s person, being or essence.⁵³ As it is, especially as supported by Yoruba culture, the role of headship in a family is exclusively that of man. However, once understood from the Trinitarian perspective, just as Christ and God are one—in the relationship of equals, so is man and woman expected to be and this calls more for responsibility than subordination of women and the children. Men who make use of this role as an opportunity to oppress women are mistaken.

⁵¹ Louis A. Brighton, "Where is the Holy Family Today? Marriage a Holy Covenant before God -- the Biblical Role of Man and Woman," *Concordia Journal* 31, no. 3 (07, 2005), 260.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ George W. Knight, "New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Male and Female with Special Reference to the Teaching/Ruling Functions in the Church," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 18, no. 2 (Spr, 1975), 81.

In his work *“Where is the Holy Family Today?”* Brighton stresses that Christian husbands today can find no better role model than Joseph as example of how to love and care for their wives,⁵⁴ for as recorded in Matthew 1:18-25, he did not hesitate to take unto himself Mary as his wife when instructed to do so by an angel of the Lord.⁵⁵ Joseph, acting contrary to all human standards and selfishness, even against his own sense of righteousness, obeyed the word of God and in faith became the husband of Mary and the godly and legal protector of the Christ Child.⁵⁶ Men in their role as husbands are to be an icon of God’s care and protection, as Joseph was to Mary; in so doing they are also an icon and reminder of Christ in His service as husband to His beloved bride, the church.⁵⁷ As Christ is the loving head of His church, so the husband is to be the loving head of his wife (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3) for the purpose of always caring for her and protecting her as Christ does the church (cf. Eph. 5:21-33). And while in this headship the husband is the earthly lord of his wife (cf. 1Peter 3:6), it is a lordship by which he serves his wife for the benefit of her well-being as well as that of her child.⁵⁸

Many Africans argue that the second class treatment is justified on the premise that women are meant to compliment males in the daily business of life—it is all about roles and responsibilities. From childhood, we are made to believe that we have different roles to play in society. While culture seems to defend these roles, I will argue that in reality, some of these roles are fixed while some are flexible. Women and men can both

⁵⁴ Brighton, *Where is the Holy Family Today? Marriage a Holy Covenant before God -- the Biblical Role of Man and Woman*, 265.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 262.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 265.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

play some roles especially when circumstances demand that one steps into roles which are not naturally constructed. For instance, the roles of women seem to change when their husbands die or they are divorced—they are the ones who do everything. A good example was when my mother had to step up to play the role of both a father and a mother after the death of my father. In some cases, men's roles also change when they find themselves without women. Such men are the ones who sweep the house, bathe their children and cook – roles which have been traditionally associated with women. However, certain roles cannot be adequately played by either sexes. For instance the biological roles of both male and female in conception are gender specific. Likewise the biological role of carrying and bringing to term of the fetus cannot be shared by a man. Arguably, the social role of the man in providing the masculine character will not be equally shared by a woman. Therefore, in the Yoruba context, the social roles and responsibilities as well as those defined by nature are necessary for child upbringing and for a mutual society.

The hope of this thesis project is to maintain the uniqueness of these natural and social roles and responsibilities as well as uproot the anarchy of oppression. It may look impossible to fight oppression and still maintain natural and socially constructed roles and responsibility; however the Yoruba tradition provides a concept which gives an example of how tradition and modern liberation can co-exist. In the Yoruba community, this concept is termed “Omoluwabi.” According to Dolapo Adeniji-Neill, “Omoluabi: the way of human being connotes respect for self and others.” Adeniji-Neill explained further that “an Omoluabi is a person of honor who believes in hard work, respects the rights of

others, and gives to the community in deeds and in action.⁵⁹” Therefore, a true Yoruba man will respect the rights and dignity of a woman, otherwise, he has defiled the ontological meaning of *Omoluwabi*.

On this front, John Kapyia Kaoma, a Zambian Anglican, educator and researcher, from another African perspective, makes another argument against those who want to justify the oppressive structures in the name of traditions. Arguing for the concept of *Ubuntu*, he argues that the African morality and indigenous political philosophy promoted the moral virtues of sharing, solidarity, interdependence, and respect for elders. It also aligned “one’s being to the family, clan, village, district, province, and wider universe.”⁶⁰ Therefore, a person with *hunhu* cannot allow another human to be homeless, starve, be dehumanized, or violated. Kaoma cites Stanlake Samkange and Tommie Marie Samkange who argued that “possessing *hunhu* involves accepting one’s cultural and social roles; being sidetracked from these traditional roles is unethical. While this aspect could have led to the oppression of women and young people in community, the Samkanges maintain that *ubuntu* should be analyzed within communal roles.”⁶¹ This argument, however, ignores the point I made above: empowering women does not mean to demean *Ubuntu*—rather strengthen it. Women are humans regardless of the social roles and responsibilities society puts on them. So what do we mean by women’s empowerment, especially to the Yoruba community?

⁵⁹ Dolapo Adeniji-Neill, "Omoluabi: The Way of Human being: An African Philosophy’s Impact on Nigerian Voluntary Immigrants’ Educational and Other Life Aspirations," *Adelphi University* (Ruth S. Ammon School of Education Garden City, NY), 1.

⁶⁰ John Kapyia Kaoma, *God's Family, God's Earth Christian Ecological Ethics of Ubuntu* (Zomba Malawi: Kachere Series, 2013), 113.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 106

Women's Empowerment in the Yoruba Christian Community

Thinking about what empowerment will mean for an African Yoruba Christian woman, I turned to my wife for her opinion. I was surprised to discover that for Comfort Olufunmilayo (my wife), her empowerment is in her fulfilment as a wife, a mother and a woman. First, she described how fulfilled she will feel when her husband is successful and empowered. Second, empowerment for her is to see her children being nurtured and prepared to face life opportunities and challenges with good demeanors. Lastly, she talked about being empowered spiritually and being fulfilled in her career. This again opened my eyes to the fact that empowerment means different things to different people. While a disenfranchised woman may be struggling for political and economic empowerment, a Christian woman may desire a different form of empowerment. This sounds like you are setting up disenfranchised and Christian as opposites. Whichever way we see it, empowerment is a situation where one's human dignity is acknowledged and respected. In other words, empowerment leads to socio-political, cultural and economic freedom.

Theologically, true freedom comes from Christ, who invites us to realize our full humanity or *Ubuntu*. Penny A. Weiss, St. Louis University's director of Women's Studies, defines freedom in any society "as the development of one's powers and the restriction of one's desires, to the realm of that which can be obtained without becoming a master or a slave."⁶² Weiss's definition of freedom points to how both men and women should live; however in this context, the access to develop personal authority and the

⁶² Penny A. Weiss, "Sex, Freedom & Equality in Rousseau's 'Emile'," *Polity* 22, no. 4 (Summer, 1990), 603.

options to restrict individual desire have been suppressed for women. For example, a Yoruba Christian woman cannot make personal decisions whether about career, finances or health without consent from her husband. Therefore, this is a good example of a situation where both males and females in oppressive patriarchal societies have been suffering from lack of true freedom. It models a situation where the oppressor, in this case, the man, also lacks freedom because his power stems from being a master, whereas according to Weiss, true freedom does not come with the mastery of others. Hence the Yoruba society will continue to suffer violence and confusion if access to power is not evenly distributed between male and female.

It is important to note that freedom alone is not enough to ensure the empowerment of women in Yoruba community. There is need to empower women in all aspects of life. Freedom would mean the provision of equal access to power whereby both men and women are involved in decision making. This is not the case in contemporary Yoruba society. As already noted, freedom must lead to socio-economic, religious and political empowerment. In contemporary Yoruba culture, men have the structured religious, economic, political cultural material power, which disempowers and oppresses women. True freedom, however, will need the wisdom of traditional religion, social sciences and Christian liberation theology. Specifically, liberation theology critiques “nature” and the “social construction” of roles in allowing oppressors not to concretely deal with meanings, uses, and concrete exercise of power.

One example of the liberative aspect of Christian theology was pioneered by the Latin American liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez. The movement started within

the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America between 1950 and the 1960s. Like the chaos within the early Church described in the Acts of the Apostles Chapter 7, where certain Hellenistic widows were neglected in the daily distributions, the Latin American liberation movement was a reaction to several social injustices which resulted in the impoverishment of the Latin American masses. According to Gutierrez, liberation theology is an interpretation of the Christian faith through the eyes of the poor,⁶³ especially the impoverished Latin American people. Gutierrez and his movement believed that a true Christian faith must be the one which embraces liberation for all, especially for the poor. He explains the salvific works of Christ in the context of liberation. The relationship between salvation, liberation and Christology was underscored in the profound statement made by Gutierrez when he said:

All the dynamism of the cosmos and of human history, the movement towards the creation of a more just fraternal world, the overcoming of social inequalities among persons, the efforts, so urgently needed on our continent, to liberate humankind from all that depersonalizes it—physical and moral misery, ignorance and hunger—as well as the awareness of human dignity—all these originate, are transformed, and reach their perfection in the saving work of Christ. In him and through him salvation is present at the heart of human history, and there is not human act which, in the last instance, is not defined in terms of it.⁶⁴

My faith formation and my vocation as priest and pastoral counselor have informed my theology of human liberation as a direct recipient of divine intervention. For the liberation of the Israelites, God had to intervene in the affairs of Egypt, and as said by Gutierrez, in our contemporary world our deliverance, especially from the act of

⁶³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), xxi-xxiii.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 104-106.

oppression, is embedded in the incarnate and redemptive works of Jesus Christ. Gutierrez's statement above explains the whole essence of God's mission on earth as liberation. Jesus affirmed my assertion when he said:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

Although Gutierrez speaks for the impoverished Latin American people, his definition fits into a wider universal context including my Yoruba community. Unfortunately, the word liberation has been viewed by Christian conservatives in Nigeria as a way of sanctioning disobedience and lawlessness. Therefore liberation has been labelled heretical, whereas liberation carries the same connotation as salvation, deliverance, redemption and freedom.

Kaoma argues that when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven,"⁶⁵ we are proclaiming the reign of God on earth. "This reality of God's reign is already established in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). As both Lord and King of this new reign, Jesus expects all his followers to live the Kingdom values of love and justice."⁶⁶ He argues that the gospel is not a pacifier of the oppressed, "but an instrument of holistic liberation or 'the sacred project of radical transformation'—founded on Christ the liberator. He argues that liberation must lead to radical transformation that leads the Church to identify with the

⁶⁵ Kapya J. Kaoma, *Raised Hopes, Shattered Dreams: Democracy, the Oppressed and the Church in Africa (The case of Zambia)*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014), 167.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

oppressed, which are the faces of Jesus in our time.”⁶⁷ He goes on to argue that “If God’s grand mission is the redemption of the entire world, then how the oppressed are treated is fundamental to Christian witness.”⁶⁸ Since the oppressed in this case are the Yoruba women, the Church in the Yoruba community needs a concrete space to make this radical transformation happen. However, for an effective women’s empowerment project like this, the necessity for the usage of acceptable terminologies that can speak and appeal to both men and women in the Yoruba Christian community is crucial. Therefore I am inclined to use the term “third space Christology.”

Third Space Christology

In the introduction, I described my idea of the metaphorical use of the term “Third World” to convey a “Third Space” where new ideas can be formulated. In her work, *Hope Abundant*, Kwok Pui-lan explains the term “third world” by asking if the term is still relevant after the dramatic changes in the world in the last twenty five years. Kwok explains that the phrase “Third World” was originally used to designate the non-aligned countries, in contrast to the capitalist First World and the socialist Second World. Kwok decided to retain the term “Third World” and she gave her reason:

It describes a relationship marked, in the past, by powers and mediated through old colonial ties and, currently, through the cultural and economic presence of neocolonialism. Such iniquitous relationships exist both globally and locally. In this sense, there is already a Third World in the First World, just as there is a First World in the Third World—the world of economic and political elite who are in collusion with the world powers.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Ultimately, what is important is not the nomenclature but the idea it conveys and the analysis it provides.⁶⁹

It is also within this context of the “Third World” that Kwok proposed the idea of metaphorical use of the term “Third World” to convey a “Third Space.” Kwok described this space as not bound by a binary mindset or dualistic and hierarchical constructions.⁷⁰ Homi Bhabha described the “Third Space” as the in-between space, which questions established categorizations of culture and identity and opens up the possibilities of renegotiating power and creating new cultural meanings.⁷¹ It is with this understanding that I propose “a third space Christology.” I am recommending a new understanding of the person of Jesus Christ and his teachings as a model for healthy leadership and acknowledgement of equal human dignity. In such a space, I envision the possibility of deconstructing men’s and women’s assumptions and coming up with new and life giving mutual relationships. I am dreaming of the possibility for men to stand in solidarity with women against the mayhem of oppression. I am asking if patriarchy can be redeemed without necessarily displacing men’s and women’s traditional roles and responsibilities. For Jesus also said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

My choice of this path is influenced by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a married, childless African woman theologian, whose wisdom has greatly informed my understanding and approach to women’s oppression, especially in the Yoruba context. Elizabeth Amoah described Oduyoye “as a wise and creative person, with many sides and

⁶⁹ Pui-lan Kwok, *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 1-2.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

talents, who treads softly but firmly through the field of theology.”⁷² Treading softly but firmly in confronting difficult situations, especially in the field of liberation theology, is an approach which can be described based on Matthew 10:16: to “be wise as serpents and be innocent as doves.” The need to tread softly but firmly is emphasized in the following story about Mercy Oduyoye narrated by Aguilar:

The cabinet drawer was stuck, and for all her violent shaking, pulling and straining, Mercy could not release the stuck drawer. So in sheer exasperation she did the next best thing and headed for the hammer and axe. Filled with determination, she was ready to shatter the drawer, when her helper intervened with the Ga words, *malaka-le*. The words *malaka-le* can be translated to mean “coaxing” or almost “encouraging through gentle tapping.” So Richard, the helper, began to gently tap, first to the right, then to the left and as he began an almost rhythm of tapping, the drawer gave way, and opened much to Mercy’s relief.⁷³

Like Oduyoye, I have also realized that confrontation is often ineffective as a means to an end.⁷⁴ Linking this to women’s struggle for gender-justice in religious and cultural settings, women’s emancipation in an African Yoruba context without an appeal to men’s conscience will lead to more crisis. Oduyoye said that such head-on altercations only resulted in the equivalence of cabinet drawers being shattered.⁷⁵ So while trying to solve the problem of women’s enslavement, I am also careful not to destroy the valued culture of community life of the African people; this is necessary so that women will not be sent into further societal stigma and vulnerability.

⁷²Isabel Apawo Phiri, Sarojini Nadar, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

The Gift of Authority: The Option for a Right Use of Male Privileges

In the Yoruba community, patriarchy can be placed alongside the concepts of hierarchy and leadership. What is the implication of having a society free of hierarchy, patriarchy, leadership, institutions and superiors? From my background of African culture, where every town and village takes pride in their kings and leaders as their protectors of rights and defense against invaders, my point of departure for this question is to imagine a city without a king, or to imagine a religious institution without a head. The Bible describes this kind of situation as one of “sheep without a shepherd,” a situation where no one has the final say and where everyone does as he/she likes; the consequence will be confusion and all manner of crisis cf. Judges 17:6; 21:25. In the Yoruba culture, both women and men agree to the fact that a family without a head is like a city without a king. Such city or family is exposed to all manner of dangers.

In a document produced by the ongoing dialogue between the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church towards ecumenism and communion, it was stated that there has been an extensive debate about the nature and exercise of authority both in the churches and in the wider society.⁷⁶ The document pointed out that Anglicans and Roman Catholics want to witness to both the churches and to the world that authority rightly exercised is a gift of God to bring reconciliation and peace to humankind.⁷⁷ It is true that the exercise of authority can be oppressive and destructive, especially in human societies

⁷⁶ The Co-Chairmen, "The Gift of Authority" (Authority in the Church III) Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC)," <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/Arcicgf3.htm>, Section 5, page 4, (accessed August, 8, 2014).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

and churches when they uncritically adopt certain patterns of authority,⁷⁸ and this is the reason why the patterns of authority exemplified in Jesus Christ should be the model for us all. It is in conformity with the mind and example of Christ that the church is called to exercise authority (cf. Lk. 22:24-27; Jhn. 13:14-15; Phi 2:1-11).⁷⁹ For the exercise of this authority the church is endowed by the Holy Spirit with a variety of gifts and ministries (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-11; Eph. 4:11-12).⁸⁰

In his reaction to the secularized idea of communion as an association of partners who are in principal free and equal, Walter Kasper, a theologian and cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, who also functions as the president emeritus of the pontifical council for promoting Christian unity, explained that the theological understanding of communion is different. According to Kasper, the church is neither a democracy nor a monarchy, nor even a constitutional monarchy.⁸¹ It is hierarchical in the original sense of the word, meaning “of holy origin,” i.e., it has to be understood on the basis of what is holy, by the gift of salvation, by the word and sacrament as authoritative signs and means of the Holy Spirit’s effectiveness.⁸² Kasper explains that “the ministry of the church is not a dominating power which oppresses people (cf. Matt. 20:25-27), but a gift and present from the Lord of the church; it is an authoritative service for building up both the individuals and the whole (Eph. 4:7-12).”⁸³

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 54.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

However, the theological understanding of communion is often replaced or overlaid by an anthropological or sociological understanding.⁸⁴ The secularized use of the word communion leads to a secularized understanding of ecumenism characterized by non-theological, general social criteria and interpretation.⁸⁵ Kasper's dictum is that "democracy may be considered the best of all bad possibilities,"⁸⁶ but democracy is far from being salvation.⁸⁷ He remarked that the experiences of the twentieth century have shown that majorities can be mobilized by populist agitation and often represent the sum of the highest number of private interests capable of forming a majority, at the expense of minorities which cannot mobilize sufficient voices.⁸⁸ Kasper cautioned that "Democratically evolved majorities, if generally recognized, may have a pacifying influence; [but] the search for truth cannot be organized by majorities."⁸⁹

While he recognized the positive and beneficial effects of a community organized by the idea of equality, Kasper remarked that institutions not only carry the danger of personal alienation and suppression of personal freedom but can also have a relieving and liberating function for individuals.⁹⁰ Kasper confirmed that institutions can give independence from personal and communal arbitrariness and create security of behavior, expectations and rights.⁹¹

⁸⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 52-53.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

To justify the importance of leadership, it is good to note that God's rebuke to the false shepherds of Israel did not put an end to their positions but promised their replacement (cf. Ezek. 34). It is also good to take note that God also promised to judge between sheep and sheep, and between rams and goats (cf. Ezek. 34:17-22), which implies conversion for both the leaders and followers.

In the Yoruba community, it may seem right that the best solution for overthrowing the oppressive structure is the complete eradication of patriarchy; however the community stands to lose the gift of leadership and authority, which can be received from both males and females. Therefore, in our struggle for equality, we must not jettison the blessings of authority, in this case, the right use of male privileges; the two concepts are not the same and each must be given its rightful recognition. Equality without a guiding authority in the Yoruba community will end in a society filled with confusion. Hence, my question is how can Yoruba men use their male privileges to empower rather than to oppress?

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN THE HELPER BECOMES HELPLESS

We do not serve the weak or the broken. What we serve is the wholeness in each other and the wholeness in life. The part in you that I serve is the same part that is strengthened in me when I serve. Unlike helping and fixing and rescuing, service is mutual.⁹² ~ Rachel Naomi Remen

My Mother's Story

I was born into an Islamic/traditional Yoruba family where my parents practiced traditional and Islamic religion. My parents converted to Christianity after their firstborn son became a minister in the Anglican Church—making them the first Christians in both my father and mother's extended family. I lost my dad when I was three months old. As a young boy at around age five or six, I witnessed the struggles encountered by my widowed mother in a male-controlled society. The challenges came mostly from my uncles and aunts and other members of my paternal family, who saw themselves as default owners of my late father's properties and inheritors of his wife. Since my mother refused to be remarried to any of my uncles, she was seen as arrogant and disobedient to traditional norms. My uncles demanded that my mother and all eight children forfeit the house and all the landed property that had belonged to my father. My paternal relatives claimed that all of my father's property belonged to them, a situation that would make life miserable for my mother and all eight children. These challenges are not uncommon among women who have lost their husbands as a result of illness or sudden death. Mary

⁹² Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings : Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000), 7.

Adebola Ajay and Abiodun Olukayode Olotuah, two Yoruba women authors, argue that these challenges are outcomes of patriarchal and traditional institutions that portray women and especially wives as dependents and as beneficiaries.⁹³ For instance among the Indians, according to Kate Young, a widow's right advocate,

Upon the death of a husband, rituals for the surviving widow can be savage. The hair is cut, or shaved off, in many cases leaving cuts in the scalp, so roughly is this carried out. The clothing and the jewelry the widow wore during her husband's lifetime are cast off, and rags or rough clothing put on. Alternatively, the widow may have to remain in dirty unwashed clothing for weeks, enclosed in one room, being given virtually nothing to eat and even in some cases having to drink the water with which her husband's corpse was cleaned. She becomes a focus of collective repudiation, seen as a bearer of bad luck, unclean, polluting and dangerous. She has to undergo rituals--many of them humiliating, and some life-threatening in these times of HIV/AIDS--to symbolically 'cleanses' her, in order to safeguard the community from her impurity. Such rituals are often seen in their cultural context as a means of a community asserting its distinct cultural identity, but underlying many of them is a common notion. This notion is that wives who outlive their husbands have done this by illegal means--witchcraft--or have failed in their duty to them. In some cultures, a widow is liable to lose all the possessions.⁹⁴

For a widow in the Yoruba community, the challenges range from dispute over who owns the property of the family to the traditional inheritance of the deceased's wife by his kinsmen. A childless widow will face even more difficulties than one who has biological children, since she is believed to be unproductive. In fact, she is said to have added no value to the family of her deceased husband. Such women are sent away empty-handed without any claims to the inheritance—mostly homes, landed properties, and money, which they (husband and wife) have struggled to acquire together.

⁹³ Mary Adebola Ajayi and Abiodun Olukayode Olotuah, "Violation of Women's Property Rights within the Family," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 66, Gender-Based Violence Trilogy Volume 1,1: Domestic Violence (2005), 58.

⁹⁴ Kate Young, "Widows without Rights: Challenging Marginalisation and Dispossession," *Gender and Development* 14, no. 2, Marginalised Peoples (Jul., 2006), 199-209, 200.

In our case, my mother was lucky to have had eight children (five males and three females) before the death of my father. We were also the first family to convert to Christianity from both my paternal and maternal sides and first to attain Western education. My eldest brother, twenty-five years my senior, and my parents' first child, converted to Christianity first. He was not only a Christian, but he also received Western education and became an ordained priest in the Anglican Church. He converted both my dad and mom, and later baptized all his siblings including myself.

The conflict between my paternal uncles and my mother was not just between a widowed woman and her in-laws; it also involved her children who had deviated from Islamic and traditional beliefs to Christianity. It was a religious struggle between the tenets of Christianity, African traditional beliefs and Islam. Moreover, since my siblings and I had also received some formal western literacy, it also became a fight between "western" values and the Yoruba-African cultural norms.

Through prayers, consultations with traditional chiefs, the town's legal services, and confrontations with my uncles, my eldest brother led all of us eight children to reclaim our father's property. We also refused to let our mother be inherited by any of our uncles. This set the battle-lines between my immediate family, and the entirety of our paternal side. The battle was not just physical, it was also a display of spiritual powers in the (diabolical) heavenly realms. Here, I am alluding to Yoruba traditional cosmology, which strongly believes in evil powers such as witchcraft. As Christians, we believed that Christ's presence in us prevailed over oppressive structures of our culture. In fact, we believed that Christ gave our family victory over the cultural powers of oppression.

However, today, I consider such a victory incomplete since many other women continue to suffer such oppressive patriarchy. I imagined what these women might be going through at the hands of men, tradition, culture, and religious systems. But I have also wondered about the male and the Christian privileges that enabled my brother to fight for his mother. What if my brother had been a woman or not a Christian priest? Can all men be conscious of these male privileges and use them to empower rather than to oppress? How can females enhance their own privileges? Can my mother and other women independently fight for their rights? In this present situation, it is obvious that this is impossible, since both religious and political power exclusively belong to men.

The Universality of Women's Oppression

As a child, I thought my mother's situation was unique. When it comes to women, however, the above systems of oppression know no boundaries. Generally, women's context may differ from place to place, but in reality, their oppression is universal. It is highly misleading to argue that women are only oppressed in the non-Christian third world or Global South societies. In democratic societies like the United States, where there are political and democratic rights, women too are oppressed. Abigail's story will show how women continue to suffer in the male-dominated world.

Abigail's Story; The Story of Women's Oppression beyond My Context

When I came to the United States, I encountered a situation that took me back to my childhood experience. A woman I will call Abigail was a patient I encountered during

one of my visitations as a hospital chaplain. A married, seventy-year-old white woman, Abigail was admitted for a left mastectomy procedure. She was getting ready for her procedure when I came to her room, and there were several hospital gadgets hooked to her body as she lay on the bed. She was covered with blanket to her chest.

In a gentle, passionate, and prophetic voice, Abigail told me almost everything she had experienced. She said that she has been in and out of the hospital for a series of surgeries and procedures. She had undergone the trauma of psychological and emotional stress. Abigail said she had been a victim of abuse and battering from her husband but that she still loved him. She told me that her husband had been an alcoholic, and now was very sick. Abigail said she was the one taking care of him presently and that he was very old and could no longer work. Lastly, she mentioned that her husband had accrued a huge debt that she had to find a means to pay. Abigail confessed being happy when this sickness began because she was thinking that this might be a means to end her life, but she was disappointed when she was told that the cancer had not spread to her right breast. She told me that she later felt guilty for thinking about death and for not being thankful to God for her state of health, but she used the word “I am tired” about fifteen times during our twenty-five minute conversation.

As I sat there listening to this woman, I felt powerless since there was nothing I could do other than to listen and be with her for the moment. As I imagined the pain of the oppression and abuse against this woman and other women in our society, my passion for women’s empowerment was re-awakened. I saw in Abigail a loving but wounded spirit. I remembered my mother and all she went through with my uncles. I also thought

about several other women who have shared their painful experience of marriage and patriarchal oppression with me. I was reminded of my own wife and our marriage, and how we could make our home an example of the intention of God for women and men.

Questions raised by these Stories:

These stories raise some ethical questions that need answering. They have led me to look deeply into women's oppression with a different perspective than that of patriarchy. I am inclined to research other areas that make women powerless and hence susceptible to societal and patriarchal abuse. I felt compelled to explore the true nature of a woman from the biblical perspective.

What does Abigail really mean by upholding her love for her husband despite all she had passed through? Could it be that Abigail's love and compassionate feminine nature was abused by her husband? Could Abigail's husband be suffering from oppressive patriarchy wherein he is not free to enjoy the benevolence of his wife? How can both Abigail and her husband be empowered so that both can choose life over death? One might think Abigail is the only one suffering from this scenario, but it is easy to observe that her abusive husband is also suffering the consequences of his male dominating character; he is presently sick, alcoholic and in debt. Although he is not seeking death like Abigail, he is not living either. Until both the oppressed and the oppressors are liberated, our society will continue to suffer the consequences of oppression.

Likewise, my mother's story raises other questions about women's oppression and liberation. To start with, what are women's rights within the Yoruba culture, especially as my mother's story deals with properties rights? What is the ideology behind denying women their rights to own property? Shouldn't properties within marriage belong to both husband and wife, especially since marriage is supposed to be a mutual relationship? What did my mother seek when she refused to be passed on as a property to my uncle and from where did she get the courage to do that? What role did education and Christianity play in my elder's brother's demand for fairness and dignity for his mother, especially as it affects women in the Yoruba Christian community? Lastly, as I think about my uncles, I imagine what they could have done differently if informed and empowered on the right use of authority and responsibility. I think of my eldest brother as one who uses his male privilege to stand in solidarity with his mother, and I wonder if men and husbands can use their privileges in standing alongside their wives, mothers, sisters and all women against every prejudice and oppression.

Since my childhood, I have explored some of these questions. I have wondered about other women who might be going through the same situation or worse. I thought of childless, illiterate, traditional or "non-Christian," indigenous women and their children. I imagined what these women might be going through at the hands of men, tradition, culture, and the misuse of religious scriptures such as in Christianity and Islam. For this reason, I particularly desire to explore more the issues of fertility and divorce as they have continued to be the major indicators of the position of women in the entire Yoruba community.

Fertility

I agree with Mario I. Aguilar, a professor of religion and politics, that the fate of women in male-dominated societies is similar worldwide;⁹⁵ however, I contend that the experience of women in the Yoruba community is unique. In the African and Yoruba community, fertility is seen as the soul of marriage, but the fact remains that women have been and are still suffering for any infertility that affects the institution of marriage. For instance, payment of the bride price is often a contract negotiated around fertility in some parts of Africa. Melissa Gonzalez-Brenes, a professor of African American Studies at Umass Amherst, confirms that “in Southern and Eastern Africa, many Bantu groups traditionally use cattle to make marriage payments. Because contracts are often (completely or partially) structured around fertility, the size, and sometimes also the timing, of the payments are linked directly to the birth of children.”⁹⁶ Aguilar confirmed that even when fertility is not a problem; women who give birth only to daughters still receive criticism from the families of their spouses.⁹⁷ This happens especially in royal families where a male child is needed to keep the throne and the crown in their lineage.

Fertility is so important in African marriage that if a woman is considered to be infertile, she may need to arrange the marriage of a prospective fertile woman to her husband. This new woman will be expected to bear children for the husband on behalf of the presumably infertile woman. Joseph Kuiriki, in “Epistemology and Praxis in African Cultural Context,” explains that “this happens within a given cultural milieu in order for

⁹⁵ Aguilar, *Ministry to Social & Religious Outcasts in Africa*, 91.

⁹⁶ Melissa Gonzalez-Brenes, *Contracting on Fertility: A Model of Marriage in Africa*, (Department of Economics University of California, Berkeley), 1.

⁹⁷ Mario I. Aguilar, *Ministry to Social & Religious Outcasts in Africa*, 9.

the barren woman to fulfill her fundamental cultural objective of ontological immortality; some African cultures offer such remedies to the extraordinary situations in order for the individual to fulfill the cultural objectives.”⁹⁸

But these objectives are gendered. For example, failure to have a boy is blamed on women, hence women are obligated to find a solution to their problem with conception and productivity. Childless women are treated with great contempt. In *African Women, Religion, and Health*, woman theologian Nyambura J. Njoroge laments that in Africa, there are many taboo that causes women and girls great pain, suffering and indignity. Chief among them is childlessness. Yoruba scholar Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde adds that in Africa, “barrenness is not only considered a curse, but the one who is barren is also considered a curse.”⁹⁹ She stresses that “it is every woman’s desire to be fruitful; thus comes the Yoruba saying *Omo ni yoo sin mi* (I will be buried by my children).”¹⁰⁰ These beliefs show to what extent Africans value children; for the love of children an African man or woman may go to any length. According to Mercy Amba Oduyoye as cited in Njoroge, African religion and culture possess different burial rituals for childless persons:

In Africa, it is at one’s death that children count most, for reproducing the human race is seen as a religious duty. One is never really a full and faithful person until one has a child. Among the Asante, burials rituals for childless persons are enacted in a way that is supposed to ensure that they are not reincarnated. Some would not call on childless ancestors in libation

⁹⁸ Joseph Kahiga, "Epistemology and Praxis in African Cultural Context," *AFER* 47, no. 3 (09, 2005), 184.

⁹⁹ Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, “Women as Healer.” In *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Phiri, Nadar, and Oduyoye. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006, 165.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

or name children after them. It is an inauspicious state, not to be celebrated.¹⁰¹

These cultures and traditions put extreme pressure on women, who in most cases are put in awkward situations by the male-centered societies that blame infertility on women. However, some women have found ways of getting children outside their marriage as a way of ensuring their respect in society. The “solutions” that women seek often come with many consequences, not only for women but for the entire community. For example, childlessness in Africa is sometimes believed to be a curse inflicted by one’s enemy, so people seek spiritual assistance to combat it. While in the process of seeking spiritual assistance, a number of women often fall victim to sexual abuse at the hands of mischievous traditional and spiritual healers, and this at times has resulted in pregnancy. The implications of this are: (1) it confirms that the wife in question had no infertility problem, even though the husband had never admitted that he could be infertile; (2) the wife will often not tell the husband of the source of her pregnancy, since she is now accepted as a real (fertile) woman by her husband’s family, so she keeps it secret; (3) the child born out of this dilemma is also denied knowledge of his or her real paternal roots; and (4) the real father may come to claim his child at a later time in the future, if traumatized by his conscience, and the husband and his family will have to face the consequence of having raised an illegitimate child. At the end, a crisis that could have been resolved between couples becomes a societal blunder, leading to all manner of confusion and trauma. Such crisis could have been avoided if men had the understanding

¹⁰¹ Nyambura J. Njoroge, “Let’s Celebrate the Power of Naming.” In *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Phiri, Nadar, and Oduyoye. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006, 66.

that they could as well have fertility problems and if women were given their equal human dignity.

Marriage and Divorce

Although Christian marriages exemplify the union between Christ and the Church, a union that is considered to be indissoluble, I am concerned that the biblical interpretation of permanency of Christian marriages concretizes human weaknesses and depravity: two platforms on which oppressive patriarchy has continued to thrive. One area that continues to uphold and support abusive relationships in the name of God is the “no-divorce Christian doctrine.” I contend that the Christian marital vow, which emphasizes the phrase “*till death do us part*,” should be used with great caution. The lasting commitment should demand a balance of mutual respect and moral commitments that can be liberating to both spouses.

While this no-divorce doctrine has been effective and beneficial for some homes and marriages, in most cases, women are the victims of the indissoluble Christian marriage. Some women have found themselves stuck in what can be described as unfortunate and life-denying relationships; they are stuck and are in bondage to that which is supposed to be liberating.

In my experience as a parish priest and pastoral counselor, I have encountered situations where it has been very hard for me to maintain the status quo of this Christian marriage doctrine. For instance, how do I as a pastor and God’s ambassador tell a woman to remain in a marital relationship, after she has been deceived into marrying an impotent

man? How can I preach “till death do you part” to a woman whose husband has turned her into a punching bag, battering and tormenting her emotionally and physically, to the extent of threatening her life? I find it difficult to tell a married woman to continue “till death” when her husband, in the pursuit of an heir and while blaming infertility on the woman, has impregnated another woman (breaking the covenant of their marriage). How can I be silent? When the extended family of the husband continues to threaten and make life miserable for the wife, I question the authenticity of such marriage. I am concerned when the husband who is supposed to support and defend his wife, declares solidarity with his family, and then continues to claim that their marriage should last. I feel uncomfortable with the doctrine of “till death do us part” when either spouse, most often the man, becomes addicted to alcohol or womanizing etc., and comes home drunk, vomiting, and defecating in the presence of the children and blames the woman for his addictions.

One might wonder how on earth any of the scenarios above could be described as a Christian marriage. Many factors have contributed to the easy and systemized practice of these abuses against women as listed above. On the one hand, there is the male ideology of African cultural practice that espouses the authority of men over and above women. On the other hand, is the distorted Christian teaching, which also in its tenets and dogmas approves the authority of men over women. It is unfortunate that various texts of the Hebrew (see Gen. 3:16) and Christian (Mark 7:24-30) scriptures undermine the dignity of women and are silent when it comes to the oppression of women; however I am thankful that Christ’s teachings spoke against women’s oppression. A good example

was the woman caught in adultery as recorded in the Gospel of John. The Jews brought the accused woman rather than the man to Jesus for judgment (see John 8:1-11). I see the Yoruba community doing a similar injustice when it comes to who is to be blamed for a marital indiscretion.

Unfortunately, this prejudice by Christianity adds another layer of justification for African people whose ideology, religion and life experience already put women in an oppressive position. The African Yoruba culture is similar to the Jewish experience and different from other western religion; the implications for indigenous women who live in a male-dominated society are multiplied, since both western Christianity and their culture support the subordination of women.

Christianity and Women

In the second creation story of Genesis, it is important to note that the naming of “woman” was not performed by God. “Woman” is Adam’s idea for the classification of the female being brought to him by God.

Although there are two different narratives of human creation in Genesis, Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:19-23, I have chosen the Genesis Chapter 2 narrative as it clearly explains the creation of a woman in a more descriptive way which will help us to understand the beginning of the dichotomy between man and woman. According to the second Genesis creation narrative, the first man Adam gives names to everything God created, including the woman, and whatever he called them is what they are today.

So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Genesis 2:19-23

I will use this narrative to explain how the concept of "naming" can be used to achieve different goals. There is an adage that says, "If you can name it, you can tame it." In their work *The Anatomy of Gender: Women's Struggle for the Body*, Currie and Raoul explain that man's desire to exert power over, to dominate, in this case to dominate women, is a desire which is rooted in fear.¹⁰² Women's bodies, dispositions, thoughts and emotions, are often experienced by men as a mystery which proves unfathomable to men. Currie and Raoul argue that even women wonder about themselves too.¹⁰³ This may be because oppressive patriarchy has long destroyed and is still destroying women's self-knowledge of their role and their power to create life, a role which has the same dignity as that of men.

Currie and Raoul argue further that men's fear evolves from ignorance and insecurity.¹⁰⁴ It is generated by "The Unknown," and for thousands of years woman has been "The Unknown" to Man. Therefore, men have feared women, and their fear has frequently taken the form of male domination over the minds and bodies of the women in

¹⁰² Dawn Currie and Valerie Raoul, *The Anatomy of Gender: Women's Struggle for the Body* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992), 53.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

their societies.¹⁰⁵ This fear of “The Unknown” has taken different forms in different societies and communities. This fear and its subsequent false solution, i.e., women’s oppression, is obvious within religious institutions and every cultural setting as highlighted above, especially in the Yoruba community. While this “Unknown” in women ought not to be a threat, but something to be discovered, unfortunately men’s insecurity around the “Unknown” has led to many assumptions and therefore the suppression of all that is feminine around us. Therefore, the work of women’s empowerment must begin with the deconstruction of all male assumptions about women and we must allow women to tell their own story and share their experiences from their own perspective.

Naming stems from ideology, assumption and stereotypes. Although naming can be a power element especially when one person or group has the power to make it normative, naming can also be an assumption based on the experiences and perspective of the observer towards a particular object. While a name might describe an object, it does not contain the total idea or value of the object. I will use the idea of Jerome Gellman, an author and philosopher of religion, to illustrate my point. Gellman argues that the acts of naming, including the naming of God, do not exist in solitude, but as part of a “naming game.”¹⁰⁶ Gellman explains that the game is played by the initial giver of a name and subsequently by those who pick the name up; of course, the game played early on may evolve and change into a different game as time goes on.¹⁰⁷ Gellman clarifies that

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Jerome I. Gellman, "The Name of God," *Noûs* 29, no. 4 (Dec., 1995), 536.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

“when naming we are generally aware, to one degree or another and in various degrees of explicitness or vagueness, what a proper naming-candidate is like.”¹⁰⁸ It may therefore be correct to say that when naming an object, one does not usually have in mind a definite description by which one intends to fix the reference.¹⁰⁹

In light of Gellman’s theory above, it is sufficient to say that a given name does not necessarily define the object named in its totality. In their argument against men’s assumptions about women’s body, Currie and Raoul state that some men believe that women were deemed defective from the start.¹¹⁰ They point to the writings of O’Faolain and her husband Martines, whose works focus on historical and contemporary status of women, to illustrate their criticism of the subjective and perpetual negative assumptions about women’s body. Men’s assumptions claimed that “there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man, and since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives.”¹¹¹ Even though this seems like a feminist criticism on Biblical interpretation, Yoruba men also have similar ideology about women. Although Yoruba men are not on the same level of interpretation, just the fact that women are made from men is enough to justify women’s degraded place in the society. Beyond creation, men have used other passages in the Bible to downgrade women.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Isabel McAslan, “Pornography or Misogyny? Fear and the Absurd.” In *Anatomy of Gender: Women's Struggle for the Body*, edited by Dawn H. Currie and Valerie Raoul, 42

¹¹¹ Ibid.

For example, in the Old Testament, women who are observing their monthly cycle were excluded from the temple for they were considered unclean and they were required to undergo a prescribed process of purification in order to return (see Leviticus 12). In the New Testament, Paul excluded women from teaching in the public; here is Paul's declaration: "Women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" (1 Corinthians 14: 34-35).

Up till today, these scriptures and many others have continually been used to diminish and downgrade women's role in the church and in our society. One will begin to wonder about the source of all these ridiculous assumptions about women. Unfortunately, some women have come to believe these assumptions about themselves too. The sad issue is, both men and women have adopted patriarchal assumptions and values, but for women, generally they have internalized these that then destroy their sense of worth, power, and equality as persons.

Woman – The Biblical Concept “The Helper”

In Genesis 2:18, the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” This scripture portrays the first man God created as lonely, helpless and needy. According to the narrative in Genesis 2, God's solution to man's state of helplessness was the creation of a woman—a helper. However, from the patriarchal perspectives observed within Christianity and Yoruba traditions

described earlier, the word “helper” here has been interpreted to mean a subordinate or an inferior being. Helper here is used in relation to the state of man’s insufficiency. Matthew Henry’s commentary describes this helper as “the one in same nature and the same rank of beings; a help *near* him, one to cohabit with him, and to be always at hand; a help *before* him (so others), one that he should look upon with pleasure and delight.”¹¹² This “helper” is the one who is able and who possesses that which is lacking in the other, “the helpless.”

In the New Testament, the words ‘helper’ and “advocate” were used to describe the person and the work of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16ff) whom Jesus Christ promised his disciples. Therefore God’s intention of creating a woman was to make complete that which was missing; it was neither to be a substitute nor a subordinate, but a complement. That is why the first creation story in Genesis 1 said, “male and female he created them and in God’s image they were created” (Genesis 1:27). Turning this helper into a punching bag, and rendering her into a powerless, oppressed and devastated being is not only a downfall of the helper, but a return to the hopeless and lonely situation of the one who is being helped. If the creation of this helper brings joy and companionship to the man and satisfaction to God, how then did the helper become helpless?

In order to answer this question in the context of the Yoruba community, we must take an in depth look at the place of women in the cosmology of the African Yoruba traditional religion.

¹¹² Matthew Henry, "Helper, Matthew Henry's Commentary on Genesis 2: 18–20," Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Gen.2.18-Gen.2.20> (accessed August, 11, 2014).

The Place of Women in African Cosmology and the Yoruba Traditional Religion

There are several mythological cosmologies within the African religion and these myths touch every area of life, including the relationship between the divine being and humans, birth, marriage, death, sexuality, gender, concepts of conflict and resolution, the origin of sacrifice and divination.

For instance in *African Religion* by Benjamin Ray, several myths of different African cultures are recounted including the myth of the Batammaliba, which revealed Kuiye, the bisexual God as the creator, the myth of the Nuer, which emphasized the origin of death, conflict and social order, the myth of the Atuot, which underscored the beginning of marriage, the myth of Kongo, highlighting death and deliverance, the myth of Baganda, which featured the origin of life and earth, and lastly the myth of Yoruba, which accentuates the withdrawal of God.¹¹³ These myths are very different in the way they are narrated, but they all have the common themes of the creation of human life and the separation of the divine and human.

For the purpose of this thesis project, I would like to reexamine the Batammaliba and the Yoruba myth of creation. According to Benjamin Ray, Kuiye decided to create the earth with two wooden beams of equal size.¹¹⁴ Once the earth was finished, Kuiye decided to create human beings; however, Ray explains that there are four different accounts of how Kuiye created the first humans, which include the account of calabash

¹¹³ Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions Symbol, Ritual, and Community* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 2.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

seeds, eggs, clay, and carved wooden figures. The myth of the carved wooden figure is narrated below:

Kuiye one day said to himself, “Should I stay alone like this without my [tree] branches? It is humans that I call my branches. If I am alone, is that good?” to make the first humans, Kuiye took something like a piece of wood and carved it...after finishing carving, Kuiye said, “That which I carved like that, I will put in the granary support. I will close the doors to seal it inside. It will take three days, then it will be human.” When Kuiye did this, after three days, it became human. And it is she who is our [female] ancestor. Afterwards, Kuiye said, “As I did this, I should not marry this woman. I will look for another piece of wood to carve.” This wood became the man. Three days later the woman slept with the man. And she gave birth to children, and we have become numerous.¹¹⁵

It is remarkable to see a different order of human creation in the Batammaliba myth, which places the creation of a woman before man. However, what is important in this narrative is not the order but the equal dignity given to both man and woman. According to Ray, the Batammaliba build their houses to represent an image of God. One side of the house represents the female image of God while other side depicts the male image of God.¹¹⁶ This division is recognized even in the crops and animals raised or killed by their men and women. The Batammaliba thus honor Kuiye by incorporating the male-female division of his/her body. By doing this, the Batammaliba make every house a sanctuary for the worship of God/ess Kuiye, which contains the shrine of the family ancestors and other deities, making every family household a temple to the invisible God/ess.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

The Myth of Moremi

There are several goddesses of the Yoruba pantheon including Osun, Moremi, Yemmo, and Oya. The particular story that has informed my model for liberation is narrated in the salvific myth of Moremi and the sacrifice of her son Oluorogbo. In *City of 201 Gods*, Olupona emphasizes the importance of gender and the role and status of women as central to his book. Olupona laments that “the study of Ile-Ife (the holy city of the Yorubas) poses intriguing questions concerning patriarchy, equal opportunity, and gender relations that the prevailing male-centered scholarly discourse surrounding Yoruba religion has not adequately addressed.”¹¹⁸ In this ethnographical illustration of Ile-Ife, Olupona extols the major role played by the Ife goddess, Moremi, and discusses the most recent recognition of this female deity by the present Ooni (King of Ife). The legendary myth of Moremi is well detailed in the *City of 201 Gods* as follows:

Moremi was very beautiful and statuesque. She was as tall as the aja or ceiling. Everywhere she went, every able-bodied man immediately desired to marry her. Moremi had only one child, called Oluorogbo. Following the incessant invasions and ensuing destruction of Ile-Ife, Moremi decided to act instead of helplessly watching marauders destroy Ile-Ife City yet again. Therefore, she devised a plan to go into the enemy’s territory alone. The Ile-Ife people were perplexed when she disclosed her plan. After all, she was a woman and not a warrior, and they feared she would sacrifice herself in vain.¹¹⁹

To the Ife people, the Igbo (their invaders) were believed to be aliens from the spirit world, and since their warriors had perished under their attacks, everyone in Ife feared the Igbos. But “Moremi remained skeptical of the origins of the invaders, as she

¹¹⁸ Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, 203.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

herself was no ordinary woman.”¹²⁰ According to the narrative, “Moremi went to the Esinmirin River and vowed that if she were to accomplish her mission in Igbo territory to save her people from the incessant invasion, she would give the river a great gift. The gift could be of great value – Moremi vowed to give whatever the river wanted.”¹²¹

Moremi then traveled to Igbo territory, where she was captured and taken to the king. At once, her radiant figure caught the king’s attention. She told the king she was a suffering woman who needed help, but she did not disclose her true identity. Moremi became one of the king’s favorites. One day, when the king was spending some time with her and was quite relaxed, she told him that she had an important question to ask him and wondered if he would oblige her with an answer. The king urged her to ask the question, which turned out to be “what was your secret that enabled you to take into slavery such large number of people from the ancient city of Ile-Ife?”¹²²

Unconsciously the Igbo king was overtaken by the woman’s beauty to the extent that he revealed to her that his armies “were neither spirits not ghosts but ordinary people wearing raffia clothing (iko) which allowed them to masquerade as spirits and ghosts.”¹²³ He went on to tell her that “If the unwieldy raffia costumes were set on fire, all Igbo would perish at once.”¹²⁴ Armed with this information Moremi went back to Ile-Ife, where she was welcomed with great honor, after which she told the Ife king and community elders the Igbos’ secret.

Thereafter, the King commanded his people to prepare the native oguso (torches), dry them, and dip them in palm oil, ready to be lit for action. When the invaders attacked next, the Ife people were prepared to light up the oguso and plunge them into the raffia costumes of the invaders, previously believed to be “ghosts.”¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

As the Igbo king had foolishly revealed to Moremi the secret, when the Igbo invaded this time, the Ife warriors did exactly as instructed. They burned some invaders, captured and imprisoned others. These captives are those the Ife people refer to today as the Oluyare, who live in the Iremo Quarters, the descendants of the captured Igbo. Their leader is now known as Obawinrin.

Following this great deliverance of Ile-Ife from the Igbo, Moremi returned to thank Esinmirin (the River) for her incredible feat and successful conquest. Through divination, she wanted to know what the river demanded¹²⁶.

To Moremi's dreadful disappointment, the river Esinmirin demanded Oluorogbo (Moremi's only son) to be sacrificed. In keeping with her vow, Moremi, in a dreadful moment, threw her precious child, Oluorogbo, into the river.¹²⁷

This powerful but solemn narrative is highly regarded in Ile-Ife myth and it is celebrated yearly in the Edi Festival. However, the reactions and the interpretation by men and the entire Ile-Ife people of Moremi's adventure into Igbo territory was met with a frivolous attitude. According to Olupona, Moremi's narrative is concerned with redemptive suffering, a common theme in most world religions; one would think that the Ile-Ife people would accord Moremi the same honor given to heroic men. However Olupona explains that an oriki (poem) heard quite often during Moremi's magnificent festival describes her as Moremi *a f'obo s'ete*, (the courageous woman who used her vagina to conquer the Igbo).¹²⁸ Such derogatory language is not uncommon among men

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 204-205.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 207.

toward women in a male-dominated society, but in this narrative, the community, especially the men, seem very ungrateful of the wisdom, heroism and sacrifice made by Moremi in rescuing Ile-Ife city. Today, a similar derogatory and demeaning character is displayed towards women, which seems to be reinforced by the way Moremi's story is described.

Although the myth of Moremi is described by Olupona as second only to the story of the world being created after the great struggle between Oduduwa and Obatala,¹²⁹ we can still observe the traditional power preference of male over female. This can be seen especially in the celebration of the Edi festival where the Yekere (male), the chief priest representing Oluorogbo the son of Moremi, attempts to usurp the place and position of Eri (female), the chief priestess representing Moremi, the mother of Yekere.

Just as men cannot give birth but can claim the children in the male-dominated world, Moremi's self-sacrifice for the love of her people was over taken by men, especially the King and elders—who are perceived as the real guardians of the land.

The Myth of Osun

Another similar Yoruba creation myth, which resonates with the theme of this thesis, is highlighted in the legendary story of Osun, the only female deity among the Irunmole (Yoruba Primordial) of the Yoruba pantheon. The myth of Osun and her relationship with other Yoruba deities has influenced and affirmed my theological thinking on liberation. The myth is said to be an *Odu Ifa* (divination interpretation) called

¹²⁹ Ibid., 206.

Osetura. Diadre Badejo, a professor of African oral and written literature, details the myth as follows:

Osun is a very great woman. She is the wife of Sango and the wife of Orunmila. Osun is the principal and the leader of aje. When Olodumare sent all the IrunMole to come to organize the world, Ogun, Sango, Orunmila, Obatala, and all the other deities, Osun was the only woman among them. They came down to arrange everything. They put everything in order. When they assembled, when they had their meetings, they did not invite Osun. Being an aje, Osun destroyed all their plans. They were not successful with any of their programs. They had to return back to Olodumare. They reported everything, and Olodumare asked them, How about Osun? They said that because she is a woman they did not invite her to their meetings. Olodumare asked them to go and beg Osun. So all the *IrunMole* came back. They apologized and they made a sacrifice to Osun. And Osun said that she wanted all the initiation of the ritual they perform for men which they used to keep women behind, she wanted it. And she wanted every woman who is powerful like her to be initiated. So they called Osun, and they showed her everything.¹³⁰

This narrative clearly demonstrates the objection of Olodumare (God) to women's oppression as Olodumare prescribes the return to Osun (the only female deity) as the solution to their problems. To my best understanding, this *Odu Ifa* (divination interpretation) confirms that oppressive patriarchy was not originally accepted within Yoruba culture. If women's oppression was not formerly acceptable in the Yoruba culture, it seems that it could be possible to redeem the image of women in the Yoruba society.

This quest to redeem the morals of Yoruba tradition has placed my understanding of African cultural traditions in a state of transition, where I have to decide which parts of

¹³⁰ Diedre Badejo, *Osun Seegesi: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power, and Femininity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), 73.

the culture need to be improved upon. The ability to make such a choice within African religion is reemphasized in the true meaning of the word “*Orisa*” (deity) as explained by Olabiyii Yai who remarks that for the Yoruba people, tradition and custom mean *orisa*—that which we select and use.¹³¹ This justifies the popular Yoruba proverb recited by Olupona that “if a god doesn’t work, you can cast him into the bush” (*Orisa ti a ke ke ke ti ko gbo ike inu igbo nii gbe*).¹³² It also justifies the arguments of scholars who claim “that the final god in the Yoruba pantheon—the 201st or 401st god, in this case the Ooni (King of Ile-Ife), can add more gods in response to new situations and needs, while old gods—such as Sonpona, (the god of smallpox)—recede into oblivion as the need they serve disappears.”¹³³

In *The City of 201 Gods*, Olupona explains how the present Olori (wife of the king of Ile-Ife) and several other Oloris of other Yoruba kings are now restoring peace, justice and sanctity in the Yoruba society through prayers and now Christian practices. Although these may look like a challenge to the survival of traditional religion, the roles of these women are not only heroic but also salvific, in the sense that they represent the spirits and life-giving powers of Osun, Moremi and other female deities. As Moremi saved the then-Ife indigenes from marauders and slavery, these women (Oloris), though in a different context and format, are now saving Yoruba people from darkness and oppression, bringing them to the light of Christ. I see Jesus Christ as proclaimed by these courageous women as the final and the 201st or 401st Orisa of the Yoruba land.

¹³¹Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, 262.

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Ibid.

Jesus' teachings compel us to pursue both spiritual and physical liberation from all forms of injustice and oppression. The authenticity of African culture must address the crucial issue of women's oppression if it is to take its stand among all other liberation movements all over the world. Chapter Four will elucidate how the person of Jesus can be understood as the liberating power of God. It will illustrate how Jesus Christ balances the true Yoruba tradition, in a much more substantial discussion.

CHAPTER THREE

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Oppression is a dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it. It is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity, become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both. ~ Paulo Freire

In my introduction and the previous two chapters, I highlighted the various ugly faces of oppression especially as faced by women in my African Yoruba context. In this chapter, I will examine the different methodologies that have been used by liberationists and human rights activists in combating oppression and thereby make a case for African women's liberation.

In this chapter, I explore the question, "How do we confront oppression in a way that is liberating to both the oppressed and their oppressor?" In order to answer this question, it is important to briefly explore the types of oppression that have disempowered women within the Yoruba, and to some extent, the Christian circles. This is where I found the "Foundations" class at EDS very useful. In order to fulfill its mission statement "to form leaders of hope, courage, and vision" who "serve and advance God's mission of justice, compassion, and reconciliation," Episcopal Divinity School always introduces incoming students to the Foundations class where we are asked to consider our vocation as a call both to embrace personal transformation and to act as God's agents of

change and liberation in the world.¹³⁴ During this class, students engage in discussions on topics such as the influence of personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural power dynamics. This class has helped me to understand the dynamics of oppression in various forms. John Bell, an author, counsellor and community organizer, who has engaged in youth work both within the US and Africa, calls these systems of oppression the four I's of oppression.¹³⁵

Ideological Oppression

According to Bell, “any oppressive system has at its core the *idea* that one group is somehow better than another, and in some measure has the right to control the other group.”¹³⁶ As already alluded to, the Yoruba tradition has the ideology that a boy child is highly preferred; the girl child is demeaned right from birth and in some contexts not accepted as a full child. Bell explains that such ideas like “boys are better than girls” get elaborated in many ways, adding the ideas that boys are more intelligent, hardworking, stronger, capable, noble, deserving, advanced, chosen, superior, and so on. Since men belong to the dominant group, they hold these ideas about themselves and they attribute opposite abilities to women, i.e., that women are lazy, stupid, weak, incompetent, worthless, less deserving, backward, inferior, and so on. As opposed to just seeing this ideology as the beginning of women's oppression, I see it as the foundation of men's distorted image of themselves and thereby leading to an oppressive character formation.

¹³⁴ Episcopal Divinity School, "Foundations," Episcopal Divinity School, <http://eds.edu/course-listings> (accessed August 12, 2014).

¹³⁵ John Bell, "The Four 'I's' of Oppression," YouthBuild USA, <https://youthbuild.org/sites/youthbuild.org/files/Four%20Is.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2014).

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Institutional Oppression

Institutional oppression is one step higher than ideological oppression. Bell explains institutional oppression as “the idea that one group is better than another group and has the right to control the other gets embedded in the institutions of the society—the religious system, the laws, the legal system and police practice, the education system and schools, hiring policies, public policies, housing development, media images, political power, etc.”¹³⁷

Since women have been labeled irrational and weak, male institutional policy makers bear in the back of their mind these assumptions when making choices and regulations. Over generations, the assumptions take on the quality of being “natural,” that is, created as a part of nature and thus objective. The ideas become laws through which women are ranked secondary in the society. Evidences of institutional oppression abound not only in the legal frameworks of society but within the Yoruba culture, and Christian and Islamic religion. My mother was victimized simply because she was a woman. It is the laws of both the religious and cultural institutions which corrupt men of their equal respect for women, thereby giving women no room for self-expression and self-defense; they are to remain quiet and submissive. Men remain in control through enacting institutional policies and practices that thus reinforce men's assumptions and further corrupt their ability to see women as equal human beings.

¹³⁷ John Bell, "The Four "I's" of Oppression."

Interpersonal Oppression

Interpersonal oppression brings us to a third level and Bell explains it this way: “the idea that one group is better than another and has the right to control the other, which gets structured into institutions, gives permission and reinforcement for individual members of the dominant group to personally disrespect or mistreat individuals in the oppressed group.”¹³⁸ It is the ideology that gives birth to the law and now extends permission to individuals in the dominant group to oppress individuals in the oppressed group. When the law sees women as subordinate to men, interpersonal oppression permits men and husbands to beat their wives, abuse them sexually, belittle them, deny them economic resources, and ignore their reasoning; after all, they are considered subordinate to men with fewer recognized human needs. If applied to the Yoruba context, interpersonal oppression has robbed men of the capability to be respectful to women and to take responsibility for the right and humble use of their male and earned privileges.

Internalized Oppression

The impact of the three types of oppression leads to the fourth level. In Bell’s words, internalized oppression is “the idea (that one group is better than another and has the right to control the other), which gave birth to the law (Institution) and which has now become a daily practice of oppression forces the oppressed group to internalize the ideology of inferiority.”¹³⁹ The oppressed women see men’s ideology of women reflected in all the institutions of society. Thus, women experience disrespect interpersonally from

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

members of the dominant group, and they eventually internalize the negative messages about themselves.¹⁴⁰

This internalized ideology of inferiority is what makes women accept oppression and submissiveness as a virtue. Over time, Abigail (the woman in my story) internalized her mistreatment by her husband and accepted that she was the weaker one. Women in the Yoruba community have accepted that they are simply created to be inferior supporters of men. This leads them to not be willing to fight for their rights because, of course, they have been told that they have no rights.

These four levels of oppression explain the system of oppression in my community, and for the effectiveness of this project, a deconstruction of the ideology that men are better than women, and that men should have control over women must be explored. For this reason, I am inclined to investigate the origin of these thoughts and perhaps begin the work of women's empowerment herein.

If Yoruba Christian women have internalized their oppression as the cultural norm and the virtue of a righteous Christian wife, and if Yoruba Christian men bear the ideology of absolute power, how then can women's empowerment be possible? As earlier discussed, Mercy Oduyoye recommends "treading softly but firmly." Freire also argues that "because oppression is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so."¹⁴¹ Mindful of Freire's caution discussed in Chapter One, it is important that the oppressed guard against becoming the oppressor.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 28.

I have been inspired by the liberative works of men and women who have stood firm against the mayhem of dehumanization in their generations. I am particularly inspired by the biblical Moses for whom I was named and whose passion vibrates within my body. I believe that the birth, survival, growth and formation of the man Moses were divinely guided for the special purpose of liberating the Israelites from the oppression of their Egyptian taskmasters. The echoes of “Let my people go” ring in my ears as I continue to see various forms of oppression in our contemporary human society. I marveled at the strong deliverance orchestrated by God and executed through the hands of Moses in bringing the people of God out of slavery and from the hands of the defiant and unyielding Pharaoh of Egypt.

The Bible, however, has various oppressive situations such as the destructions of other nations, people, animals and vegetation by the Israelites on their way and when they conquered the Promised Land. Arguably, they had taken on the very character of their oppressors. Although, this destruction was said to be carried out in obedience to God, this is another example of sacralized oppression. Just as the Yorubas justify patriarchy in the name of gods and ancestors, arguably the Israelites justified the mistreatment of others in the name of Yahweh (See Joshua 9:24, Exodus 23:23; Deuteronomy 7:1-2; Joshua 3:10, Joshua 9:24, and Joshua 6:21,24). In this regard, how can Yoruba women avoid the similar trap? And what can they learn from the Christian feminist movement in their hopes of liberation?

Feminist Liberation Theology

In her work, *Feminist Theology as a Revitalization Movement*, Amanda Porterfield defines feminist theology as “an American-based movement whose participants hope to empower women and maintain a healthier planet by overturning patriarchal attitudes and social structures that oppress women and threaten the natural environment.”¹⁴² Although Porterfield bases feminist theology in the US, in reality, the movement has global expressions too. Across Africa, women played a critical role in the liberation struggles that led to the independence of the continent. These women broke the customs that once limited women's participation in the socio-political life of the continent.

That said, the American feminist movement has its roots in the most organized feminist movement of the global North and America in particular. Beginning with Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1848), an American social activist, abolitionist and leading figure of the early women's right movements (known as “first wave feminism,”) the feminist movement continued to grow in its vision until the second wave of the 1960s when Mary Daly, an American feminist philosopher, academic and theologian, took feminist theology to a higher level. Feminist theology has continued to thrive with the works of Letty Russell, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza among many others.

While I was pondering the challenge of empowering women in the Yoruba society, I encountered the works of Letty Russell, which illuminate the situation in a more engaging way. In her work, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A*

¹⁴² Amanda Porterfield, "Feminist Theology as a Revitalization Movement," *Sociological Analysis* 48, no. 3 (Autumn, 1987), 234.

Theology, Russell states that “The oppression of women is the most universal form of exploitation which supports and perpetuates the other forms of exploitation in both church and society.” Russell describes women’s oppression as sinful. She defines sin as a refusal; it is “a refusal to give others room to breathe and live as human beings.”¹⁴³

When I encountered Russell’s definition of sin, I was immediately caught up in my spirit as if I had found an answer, not just to women’s liberation but also to human liberation.

I agree with Russell’s analogy of liberation theologies pointing to sin as “a refusal to give others room to breathe and live as human beings,” but this refusal does not have to be from the oppressors alone; it can also be from the oppressed. I like to point out that this refusal is initiated by “separation” as explained by Paul Tillich in *The Shaking of the Foundations*. In this collection of sermons, Tillich proposes that “sin” should never be used in the plural and that not our sins, but rather our sin is the great, all-pervading problem of our life.¹⁴⁴ In this profound sermon, Tillich went further to suggest another word, “Separation” not as a substitute for the word “sin,” but as a useful clue in the interpretation of the word “sin.” Tillich said:

Separation is an aspect of the experience of everyone. Perhaps the word "sin" has the same root as the word "asunder". In any case, *sin is separation*. To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation. And separation is threefold: there is separation among individual lives, separation of a man from himself, and separation of all men from the Ground of Being.

¹⁴³ Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 112.

¹⁴⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations [Sermons]*. (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1948), 5.

This three-fold separation clearly explains the context in which all human suffering exists. Tillich calls it “a universal fact; it is the fate of every life.” He explains it as “our human fate in a very special sense.”¹⁴⁵

For *we* as men know that we are separated. We not only suffer with all other creatures because of the self-destructive consequences of our separation, but also know *why* we suffer. We know that we are estranged from something to which we really belong, and with which we *should* be united. We know that the fate of separation is not merely a natural event like a flash of sudden lightning, but that it is an experience in which we actively participate, in which our whole personality is involved, and that, as fate, it is also *guilt*.¹⁴⁶

According to Tillich, “Separation which is fate *and* guilt constitutes the meaning of the word ‘sin.’”¹⁴⁷ Therefore, connecting the insights from both Russell and Tillich, liberation theology will then mean allowing others to be human but also to be reunited to one another and to the Ground of Being (God).

How then can this acceptance and reunion with God and one another be possible, if Yoruba culture and western Christianity continue to put women at the mercy of men? It implies that human liberation will only be possible if culture and religion are reexamined. It implies that the oppressed, in this case women, especially at the grassroots in every culture and religion, have a huge role to play. Russell points out that “it is now time for women to play the listening role of Mary; listening to Jesus and acting out the gospel of freedom, rather than remaining in the kitchen with Martha”¹⁴⁸ (Luke 10:38-42).

Russell explains that “this action on the part of women as well as men and all of us working on the cause of liberation will not be balanced without the help of the Holy

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Russell, Letty M. *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology*, 40.

Spirit.”¹⁴⁹ She points out bluntly that the Spirit will not make the way easy, but will help us all to be constantly disturbed and force us to prophetic action.¹⁵⁰ This is a powerful description of what the Spirit of God can do within us. I have always supposed that the fruits of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, as said by Paul in Galatians (5:22-23). To this text, one can add that among the fruits of the Holy Spirit is “a constant disturbing power against all forms of oppression.”¹⁵¹ The poet Julius Lester quoted by Russell makes this clear: “our prayer is not just for a critical consciousness, but also for the constant disturbing power which can cut that consciousness like a razor, disturbing us, and forcing us to prophetic action.”¹⁵² We should however be reminded that this “disturbing power” can be misinterpreted as a problem rather than a solution, but we should remember that sometimes crisis may precede peace.

It is worth noting that the work of liberation is not an easy task and will never be an easy one. We should be aware that the work of liberation is not going to be accomplished until all are liberated. Personal willingness and courage to be a misfit in society will be required. All must be willing to think and act with those who are groaning for liberation and working to disturb the status quo. The cost of this may mean becoming "marginal persons," those who don't fit with their peers or into accepted norms in either church or society,¹⁵³ but I hope that we will all see this as a cause worth paying any price.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 39.

Human Rights--Image of God

Women's oppression is not about culture or theology alone, but also about fundamental human rights. The concept of human rights is well established in both political and religious circles. On December 10, 1948, the *United Nations Human Rights Charter* was established as the standard of universal human rights, thereby sanctioning the benchmarks of our common humanity. In Africa, the UN Charter was complemented by the June 1981 *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*. Unlike the UN Charter, however, the African Charter argued that humans as communities (not just as individual human beings), have the right to be protected from Western exploitation. On July 11, 1981, "The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa," also known as the Maputo Protocol extended these rights specifically to women. Aside from demanding that women should have the right to be treated with dignity, article 14 of the Maputo Protocol, for instance, committed African governments themselves to ensure women's health and reproductive rights including safe abortions. Of the 53 member countries in the African Union, the heads of state of 46 countries signed the protocol, including Nigeria, and as of 2012, 32 of those countries had ratified and initiated the protocol.¹⁵⁴ Hence, defending women's oppression in any form is not just wrong but is now illegal. Even further among the Yoruba, as already alluded to in Chapter One, the concept of Omoluwabi forbids a true Yoruba man or woman from violating the fundamental rights of another person. Thus we can argue that depriving

¹⁵⁴ The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), "Report on Status of Ratification of Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa," 10 September 2012, <http://femnet.co/index.php/en/other-publications/item/100-report-on-status-of-ratification-of-protocol-on-the-rights-of-women-in-africa> (accessed August 12, 2014); African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, www.achpr.org/files/...protocol/achpr_instr_proto_women_eng.pdf (accessed August 12, 2014).

women of their rights and dignity suggests our unfaithfulness to our ancestor “Oduduwa” and hence to Olodumare (God).

As Nicholas Wolterstorff said, a community “is just insofar as its members—both individual members and its institutional and communal members—enjoy those goods to which they have a right. To fail to enjoy one’s right is to be wronged.”¹⁵⁵ From the Christian perspective, human rights are centered on the claim that human beings are made in the image of God. As images of God, our dignity is founded on God. Here, I return to Kaoma who makes the following claim:

While philosophers have viewed natural rights as a product of the Enlightenment, Wolterstorff contends otherwise. He notes that the fact that the 12th Century canon lawyers appealed to “natural human rights” suggests the Bible as the source of our conception of these rights. To him, human rights can hardly be defended from a secular position since “there is no adequate secular grounding for human rights, and unlikely there ever will be one; the only adequate grounding is the theistic grounding which holds that each and every human being bears the image of God and is equally loved by God.”¹⁵⁶

Moreover, “each and every human being, no matter what she has done, no matter what capacities she has or lacks, possesses a dignity that must never be violated.”¹⁵⁷ No doubt the biggest task of the Church is to defend the wronged from the male-dominated structures of traditional religions, Christianity and even Islam. Every human being—regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race and even religious affiliation has God-endowed rights that cannot be denied.

¹⁵⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “How Social Justice Got Me and Why It Never Left,” In *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no.3 (September 2008), 669. Quoted in Kaoma, *God’s Family, God’s Earth*, 189.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 190.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

This understanding, however, can be challenged by those who argue that community rights are different. A community has the right to assert and protect its culture from outside influences. Yet when it comes to the universal values of human rights, there is need for the Yoruba culture to reevaluate and redeem its values for family and community life. As Amy Gutmann argues, “Cultural survival in and of itself is ...not a human right, since the ultimate beneficiaries and claimants of human rights must be persons, and the price of enabling some cultures to survive may be violating human rights.”¹⁵⁸ From this perspective, sanctioning oppressive patriarchy in the name of religion or tradition is violating the rights of women. Every religion and culture can be protective of its values but not at the expense of individual human rights.

While all these laws protecting human rights globally, internationally and locally may sound good, the question remains: how do we make them work for women and men at the grassroots? What do African women theologians have to say about liberation theology?

African Women Theologians’ Perspective on Women’s Oppression

African women theologians have blamed women’s oppression in a patriarchal society partly on African culture and partly on the western influence of Christianity. The impact of the contradictions between western Christianity and indigenous religion on women can be very complex, and I empathize with the dilemma of African Christian women who are not only required to be submissive to their husbands as culturally

¹⁵⁸ Amy Gutmann, "Identity in Democracy," (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2033), 77.

accepted, but also to be obedient to the laws of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. This places indigenous women under dual hierarchies of external and internal institutionalized oppressive systems.

Modern African theologians have described the Christianity that was introduced to Africa as a neocolonial theology. It is described as the oppressive notion that imposes western ideas on all other parts of the world. Musa Dube described this as:

the structural epistemology that assumes that the West/North holds the best answer for the whole world—civilization, progress, language, science, faith, its brand of democracy, medicine, law, education, environmental care, development, and freedom—which was established in colonial times and continues today, informing the economic, political, and reproductive policies that are often recommended to all worldwide.¹⁵⁹

In a critique of this form of idea and theology, Emmanuel Martey and other African theologians pointed out the need for African theology to be stripped of westernization. The ideology behind this argument was fully captured in a statement issued by the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians stated below:

We believe that African theology must be understood in the context of African life and culture and the creative attempt of African people to shape a new future that is different from the colonial past and the neocolonial present....African theology must reject, therefore, the prefabricated ideas of the North Atlantic theology by defining itself according to the struggles of the people in their resistance against structures of domination. Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Musa Dube, “Adinka! Four Hearts Joined Together.” In *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Phiri, Nadar, and Oduyoye. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 134.

¹⁶⁰ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 63.

Inasmuch as I appreciated this move and also in my critical analysis of the agenda, I could not find a voice for women's liberation; the major preoccupation of African male theologians here seems to be the oppression and domination by the West. For instance, Martey pointed out that two major problems were encountered in the process of Africanization and its adaptation. The first was "the lack of sufficient numerous native clergy and of trained Catholic laity"¹⁶¹ (which of course are mostly men). The need was seen to be training priests and lay people to be a cadre of Africanization—the forerunners of new Christian Africa. The second problem was "the attempt to make a case for African interpretation of Christianity which otherwise would mean an African re-interpretation of the faith, and the attempt to find African Theology."¹⁶² By saying this, African re-interpretation of the faith could mean the acceptance of cultural practices like polygamy, widowhood rituals, female circumcision, juvenile girl marriage etc., all of which in African practice are seen as having to do with culture, religion and traditional norms rather than oppression of women.

After several unsuccessful attempts at formulation of an African theological voice, which includes the "stepping stones theory"¹⁶³ and different approaches such as adaptation, incarnation and indigenization, African male theologians came up with the idea of inculturation—a term derived from sociology and anthropology. Justin Ukpong, in *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*, describes the ideology of inculturation as follows:

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 64.

¹⁶² Ibid .

¹⁶³ Stepping stones theory presupposes the presence of certain conceptual tools within African culture which, if identified, could be useful in communicating the gospel message to Africans effectively.

In this approach, the theologian's task consists in re-thinking and re-expressing the original Christian message in an African cultural milieu. It is the task of confronting the Christian faith and African culture. In the process there is interpretation of both. Christian faith enlightens African culture and the basic data of revelation contained in the scriptures and tradition are critically re-examined for the purpose of giving them African cultural expression. Thus there is integration of faith and culture, and from it is born a new theological reflection that is African and Christian. In this approach therefore, African theology means Christian faith attaining African cultural expression.¹⁶⁴

While I acknowledge the perseverance of African theologians to have reached this stage in their struggle of claiming African realities, it is also important to note that present-day African Christianity, like its western counterparts, is far from addressing the issue of oppression within its belief system. Therefore, rather than liberating, the Africanization of Christianity has brought a double seal on women's oppression since both Christianity and African culture endorse the assertion that teaches that women must be subordinate to men.

This is where I have come to appreciate Musumbi Kanyoro, an African woman theologian who in her works has helped to throw more light on this predicament. Kanyoro in *Hope Abundant* voices that African indigenous women today are walking with one foot in African religion and culture and another in church and western culture.¹⁶⁵ Take the marriage ceremony for example. Before the advent of the western Christian missionaries, an African Yoruba marriage ceremony was a traditional wedding

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶⁵ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the Twenty-first Century." In *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*, ed., Kwok Pui-lan. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 19.

where the family of the groom fulfilled all obligations including the payment of dowry to the family of the bride. This was done with the full participation of all members of the extended family of both bride and groom and culminated in prayers and blessings by the elders.

Today in African society especially in Nigeria, the after-effect of the Africanization of Christianity requires a church wedding ceremony irrespective of whether a traditional wedding has been done or not. However, because of their dual obligations to culture and religion, African Christian families have no option but to fulfill both. The traditional wedding is now conducted a day or days prior to the church wedding; the effect of such dual praxis of wedding ceremonies is economically unthinkable and time-consuming for both men and women. However both cultural and church ceremonies, through prayer and rituals, systematically remind women of their call to submit to their husbands even in the face of death.

In her contribution to *Theology in the First Century*, Kanyoro argues that inculturation in African theology is driven by the male agenda. She thus suggests confronting this agenda by naming it. As already discussed, the inculturation of Yoruba culture in Christian marriage places a double seal on women's oppression, since both culture and Christianity teaches women's submission; there is need to confront the effects of such teaching on women. Kanyoro maintains that inculturation will not be sufficient unless the cultures we reclaim are analyzed and are deemed worthy in terms of promoting justice and supporting life and the dignity of women.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

In the same vein, Kanyoro and other women reclaimed the voice of women at the World Conference of Human Rights in opposition to an argument which was put forward by Asian and African governments, that “human rights are culturally determined and, therefore, that we cannot speak about universal understanding of human rights.”¹⁶⁷ Women at this conference struggled to “maintain a united front on the issue of universal human rights,” because they “saw the possibility of using culture to explain away violations of women’s rights.”¹⁶⁸ At this conference, Kanyoro emphasized that they were greatly helped by the worldwide awareness of how violence against women defies borders of culture, race, geography and class.¹⁶⁹

The stories of my mother and Abigail are great examples that illustrate the universality of women’s oppression. However, while solidarity among women can be a foundation for liberation, the differences in morality and faith across cultures around the globe can be a challenge.

Morality and Confession of Faith

In a response to the African conception of homosexuality, Kawuki Mukasa, an African theologian, raised three objections that must be addressed in order to liberate homosexuals in the African context. I would like examine two of these and use them as a platform to understand African theologians concerning women’s liberation. One is a moral concern and the second is the concern for proper confession of faith.

¹⁶⁷ Musimbi, R. A. Kanyoro, “Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution,” In *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube Shomanah. (Atlanta, GA; Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature; WCC Publications, 2001), 101.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Mukasa's description of the African family and community setup will help my western colleagues to understand why the work of autonomous or individual liberation will be difficult in an African context. In Africa, in this case Uganda but also in Nigeria and most African communities, morality is defined in terms of the collective stability and welfare of the community.¹⁷⁰ Mukasa emphasizes that "a person's identity does not spring from their individuality; it arises from the community to which they belong; the extended family, the clan."¹⁷¹ Mukasa explains that an individual's behavior reflects the integrity of the community to which he or she belongs, and on the other hand, the community's esteem is reflected in the stature and morality of its members.¹⁷² This African identity is not only applied to the issue of homosexuality but to all other ethical and moral issues like battering, smoking, alcoholism, sexual immorality, disrespect to elders, incest etc., all of which are believed to not conform or add positive values to the general wellbeing of most African communities.

However, I argue that the generalization or categorization of sexuality and sexual orientation under sexual immorality is inconsistent. The understanding of people with different sexual orientation has to do with respecting human dignity, and has nothing to do with issues conceived as detrimental to the community. This is a misconception, which will need to be revisited. The same misconception goes for categorizing women's submission as a form of respect for men or for the elders. Respect must be earned and not demanded. A man who treats his wife and other women like a human being and not just

¹⁷⁰ Kawuki Mukasa, "The Church of Uganda and the Problem of Human Sexuality: Responding to Concerns from the Ugandan Context." In *Other Voices, Other Worlds: The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality*. ed. Terry Brown. (New York: Church Publishing, 2006), 170.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

as a property, which can be tossed around and trashed, has already earned women's respect. As already emphasized, the African Yoruba value of Omoluwabi esteems respecting individual human dignity as the key to ensuring communal moral stability.

For the oppressed voices to be heard, I agree with Mukasa that "the Church needs to take a more critical examination of its position, understanding that we do not yet have all the answers and that certain dimensions of truth are still hidden from our views. The claims we make about our experiences and who we are must remain open to new insights from sources hitherto unknown."¹⁷³

The second point has to do with what Mukasa calls "the concern for proper confession of faith."¹⁷⁴ African Christianity is embedded and deeply rooted in the authority of the scriptures, which at times even confronts most indigenous African religious praxis. As Mukasa argues, most African church leaders hold the view that "the Bible prescribes a code of conduct for the faithful to follow in every situation and in this regard, faith is indeed approached from dogma to life."¹⁷⁵ Africans take doctrinal principles from the scriptures and apply them prescriptively to particular situations or contexts. Anything in human behavior that does not fit the stipulations of these principles is considered sinful and rebellious and so must be rejected.¹⁷⁶ Mukassa warns that even if we grant that this is the most appropriate model for practicing the faith, it will be impossible to apply it consistently any given cultural context.¹⁷⁷ For example, just as Africans have many cultural practices which comply with the Holy Scriptures, we also

¹⁷³ Ibid., 175.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 176.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

have some which do not, and the church has had to come up with different ways of resolving ethical and societal issues. Mukassa cited examples like the praxis of African Churches on the issue of polygamy, which has evolved, driven primarily by the dynamics of society.¹⁷⁸ Other examples include the challenges with children born out of wedlock and their place in the Church,¹⁷⁹ or the issue of premarital pregnancy and the improvising of the blessing of marriage. All these point to how the African Church has been adapting to the scriptures while at the same time respecting people's experiences and meeting them where they are. So the question now is, how can the African Church view homosexuality differently and perhaps listen deeply and more intentionally? In the same vein, the liberation of women in Africa needs a different approach to the reading of the scriptures.

A reinterpretation of such scriptures which clearly and distinctly highlight women's leadership as a sin and which talk about "confusions" and "turning away from faith in the last days," i.e., 2 Timothy 4:3-5; 3:1-5, must be correctly explained by African theologians in a thorough biblical hermeneutic; otherwise a true confession of faith will be said to be polluted and compromised by a false understanding of women's dignity.

The Power of the Scriptures and Biblical Hermeneutics

As discussed above, Biblical hermeneutics is as important to Christian liberation theology as cultural hermeneutics is to women's liberation in Africa. If the Bible is not

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 177.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

properly explained in a thorough hermeneutical and balanced Christology, it will put women and all marginalized people at a disadvantage, and pose a serious threat to the women's liberation movement. As I have discussed earlier, there are many similarities between African cultural beliefs and the teachings of the Bible, both of which can sometimes be dogmatic and oppressive. For instance, in my experience as a parish priest and counselor, I often encounter issues where wives are in the dilemma of whether to leave or stay in abusive marriages.

African Christian women always want to make sure that their decisions are in line with the teachings of the Bible; therefore even when it seems appropriate for a woman to leave a life-threatening relationship, she is often confronted with "no-divorce" doctrinal issues and the dilemmas of facing societal stigmas. I have had to argue against colleague priests who believe in the "no-divorce" principle of the scriptures. They do not see maintaining such marriages as physically, mentally, and spiritually abusive, or life-threatening. All they have said to me is, "God hates divorce." I, however, have always responded that God hates oppression more.

Those who canonized the Bible were conscious of the possibility of re-writing and the re-reading of its texts, and so they ended the Bible with a note of warning from the Book of Revelations, which reads thus:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll. (Revelations 22: 18-19).

This part of the scripture is being strictly taught in most evangelical Bible seminaries, Churches and Christian gatherings as a seal on the entire biblical account. This is because most African Churches teach a literal interpretation method, which causes men and women to read historical accounts of the treatment of women in the Old and New Testaments as instructional.

Jesus Christ made many improvements on the Hebrew Scriptures as he exemplified and corrected the Pharisees and teachers of the law on several issues. A good example will be Jesus' teachings and attitude toward the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Rather than viewing her as the other, Jesus identified with the plight of the woman and used his privileges as the son of God to liberate the woman from the jaws of death. He showed compassion, wisdom, healing and reconciliation. An examination of the literal gestures of Jesus in this text will open our eyes to what true liberation is all about and can teach the Church in its quest for women's empowerment and liberation.

When the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery to Jesus and they cited what the law says concerning such acts, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, the law of Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" Meanwhile the narrative described the Pharisees and scribes as having conspired together to test Jesus. Therefore, the woman caught in the act of adultery is not the only victim here; even Jesus is a supposed victim of conspiracy, as are the accusers whom I consider prisoners of the laws and traditions. They have been overpowered by their conspiracy: they too need

deliverance. To save these three victims of oppression let us pay attention to every step of Jesus in this narrative.

The first act of Jesus was that he bent down. He came down to earth! He came down to reality, not just the ideal. He came to the lowest, to the base, to reasoning, to the humane spirit. He came down to the excluded and to the condemned. He was in touch with the earth. He came down to that (ground) which is common to both the oppressed and the oppressors.

Secondly, He wrote on the ground. The first time I heard of God writing with fingers was when God wrote the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). The second one was in the book of Daniel 5, when King Belshazzar saw a human hand, writing on the wall. It was a writing that declared the downfall of King Belshazzar's kingdom. This time, Jesus chooses to write not on tablets nor on walls, but on sand, perhaps so that his writings will not become another testament which can be quoted to judge or to condemn, but a remembrance of words spoken in season, which only the wise, who can stoop down, will be able to interpret and apply.

Many preachers and theologians have tried to guess what Jesus wrote on the ground. In my own opinion, Jesus was just taking his time, consulting with God and the Holy Spirit on how best to use this opportunity for liberation. What he wrote we do not know, but what he said was powerful and liberating. Perhaps it is not what was written--our code of laws, traditions, authorship, academics and degrees--that matters, but what we say and do, especially on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. Paul's word in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians is here confirmed: that "Christ has made us

competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

Jesus said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” This statement was the one stone, which Jesus used to kill three birds at the same time. This statement did not just set the woman free, it also set the accusers free from the spirit of fault-finding, murder and oppression. The statement also set Jesus free from their traps, for they had initially come to trap him by his judgment. This statement was the one stone to which all other stones surrendered, for they all went home dropping their stones.

This kind of interpretation of the narrative above is a good example of how biblical hermeneutics can be used to review literal understandings of Biblical instructions, especially as they apply to women in the Yoruba Christian context. With new and liberating Biblical hermeneutics, Old Testament narratives which have been used to justify women’s submission and inferiority, such as the stories of Abraham, Sarah and Haggai, Queen Esther and Vashti, Ruth, Orpah and Naomi, etc., can be read from women’s perspective and in the context of Christ’s redemptive works as seen above. The following chapter will explore further this analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHRISTOLOGY

A blessing is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another. By making a place for wholeness within our relationship, we offer others the opportunity to be whole without shame and become a place of refuge from everything in them and around them that is not genuine. We enable people to remember who they are. ~ Rachael Remen

As noted throughout this thesis, and as I strive in my concern for women's empowerment, it is clear that the prophetic voice of Christ is crucial in addressing women's oppression. Studies in other religions have both challenged and deepened my faith in Christ Jesus, especially with his works of liberation on behalf of the oppressed and the reconciliation of the world to God. An in-depth understanding of the role of Jesus Christ in the struggle for the emancipation of women from patriarchal society is crucial, especially in the current wave of evangelical and Pentecostal movements in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Although the salvation in Christ Jesus is meant for all, the claims and the monopolization of Christianity and the Church in the name of Christ have placed limitations on these salvific resources, especially for people of other religions, cultures and creeds.

Christianity, particularly in the African Yoruba community, demands that anyone who will partake of these blessings must forsake their former values, culture, faith, family, friends and probably their experiences and then become "a new creature."

Examples of passages that have been literally cited and emphasized as a justification for this assertion include the following:

- Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. 2 Corinthians 5:17
- Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? 2 Corinthians 6:14
- If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:26
- And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins. Mark 2:22

In a reflection on these texts, Rowan Williams, former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, has raised three criticisms that resonate with my thoughts, especially as I think of liberation among non-Christians. Williams categorized these criticisms under moral, political and philosophical ideas. I will cite the moral criticism here:

What kind of God is it who makes salvation or eternal life dependent on what's always going to be a rather chancy matter? What about all those people who never had a chance of hearing about Jesus? What about all those who have heard about Jesus but have not understood or waited to find out? What about the generations before Jesus? What about the whole realm of non-Christian culture untouched for centuries by the Christian gospel? Can we believe in a *just* God who--in effect--punishes people for not being in the right place at the right time?¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Rowan Williams, "The Finality of Christ in a Pluralist World," Rowan Williams 2014, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/585/the-finality-of-christ-in-a-pluralist-world> (accessed August 12, 2014).

In response to these questions, Williams suggested that the questions put before us are questions not only about the position of Christianity in relation to other religions, but a question about whether we believe there *is* something that is true in, and for, all human beings.¹⁸¹ Williams asked, do human beings have different needs and different destinies?¹⁸² Christianity has a message for the whole world, which cannot be restricted to just a few; it is a light which must be placed on a candle stand and which must give illumination to all. Williams says it well:

There is a truth about human beings, God has revealed it in Jesus Christ and revealed himself in that action. That's what we know. And how those who don't encounter that mystery explicitly and directly, are related to Jesus and the Father, we can't know and we'd better not pretend that we do. The unfairness would be in saying that there is no access for some at all, or in saying that we don't have to bother to share.¹⁸³

The irony of the conversion from other religions, like Yoruba traditional religion, to Christianity is that it displays a kind of new life experience for those who can forsake all their former life. They seem to have passed from darkness into light. They possess the ready power of Jesus, which can combat all forces or adversaries (as seen in my story) and they can also tap into the power of prosperity and healing. However, the gaps between those who adhere to this new life and those who choose to retain their former religion have continued to widen. Just like the gap between the rich and the poor, the joy of Christians seems to grow and continue on a daily basis, especially as they discover

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

more and more of the power in the gospel to save and deliver them from every adversary and obstacle.

In contrast, and especially at the grassroots, the sufferings of the masses continue to grow at an alarming rate, and therefore, in the same family or community, it is not uncommon to see those who are healthy and happy and at the same time those who are extremely impoverished. In her work, *Liberation Theology in the Twenty first Century*, Kwok Pui-Lan makes reference to the diversity of the poor and the oppressed in the world by stating that the majority of them are non-Christians.¹⁸⁴ Kwok emphasizes the need for a religio-cultural dimension of liberation by citing the statement by the Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris who said that:

The irruption of the Third World is also the irruption of the non-Christian world. The vast majority of God's poor perceive their ultimate concern and symbolize their struggle for liberation in the idiom of non-Christian religions and cultures. Therefore, a theology that does not speak to or through this non-Christian peoplehood is an esoteric luxury of a Christian minority.¹⁸⁵

However, some Christian theologies do not accept these idioms of non-Christian religions and culture. Christian fundamentalist ways of extending a hand of love to people of other religions is to preach salvation in Jesus Christ and that Christian religion is the only way to liberation and a new life. To be converted and to be baptized in the name of Christ is a requirement for all those who want to experience this new life. They insist that conversion includes the complete turning away from all other religions and beliefs. As a result of this conversion, many Nigerians have abandoned their cultural

¹⁸⁴ Kwok, Pui-lan. "Liberation Theology in the Twenty-First Century," In *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 77.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

practices and religion in the pursuit of this new life. Some have abandoned their hometowns and villages, and fled from their ancestral roots. Many families and communities have been fragmented over the issues of religion. Some even go to the extent of changing their original indigenous names, especially when they have any connections with traditional religion. For instance the last name Ogungbemi (the god of Iron saved me) is now changed to Jesugbemi (Jesus saved me). Some have even totally rejected indigenous and traditional names and have taken biblical names—for instance the name Moses is my baptismal name and not my traditional name.

From the perspective of Christianity, the wisdom in traditions and ancestral heritages are now downtrodden and viewed as totally devilish. Ancient ancestral covenants and curses are broken by the power in the name of Jesus. As good as this may look, it jeopardizes traditional values in combating women's oppression. For instance, it eliminates the possibility of hearing what Ifa divination has to say against women's oppression and it also undermines such values as *Omoluwabi*. According to Christian fundamentalists quoting several literal biblical texts, the refusal to be converted to Christianity does not only carry physical penalties, it also means a rejection by God and a denial of entry into God's kingdom in the life after death (see John 3:16). People without salvation in Christ Jesus are therefore considered to be doomed to destruction and eternal punishments irrespective of their age, circumstances and benevolence.

For some Christians, new life, new friends, new family, and new relationships have emerged for those who are in Christ Jesus and they have separated themselves from their old life and relationships. In a society where people cannot but cross paths, the

relationship between Christians and people of other religions (in Nigeria, this will mean Islam and traditional religion) has become very tense and full of suspicions, carefulness, doubt and disconnections. In public places like grocery stores, hospitals, banks, and public markets where people ought to trust and coexist, stereotyping and judgmental attitudes have replaced what used to be a community of mutual values and love.

While it is easy to separate in the name of religion, there are certain family and communal festivities that have forced people of different religions to celebrate together, for instance, at the birth of a new child, at wedding ceremonies, and at funerals. These celebrations have often caused adherents of different faiths to come together and cross boundaries for the sake of their loved ones. Therefore the literal applications of the text “do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14), which many African evangelicals adhere to cannot be totally true. The implication of this dichotomy on women’s liberation is very challenging since women of different faiths cannot come together with one voice.

Common Grounds

Beyond these divisions, the place of human suffering is a common ground, which no religion can deny, not even Christianity. In the mutuality model as explained by Paul Knitter, the veracity of suffering which penetrates and transcends all religions and cultural realities is extensively discussed. The four major areas of suffering are here highlighted and I would like to elaborate on them in the context of this thesis project.

Poverty

Knitter referred to the portion of the world's population who do not have enough of the world's goods to provide their children with the food, shelter and medical care they need to live human lives.¹⁸⁶ In Nigeria, despite the high economic growth of about 7.4% over the last decade and the increased growth of Christianity, poverty is still very high. In 2014, "the World Bank established that Nigeria with about 170 million population falls among countries with extreme poverty whose over 70% population live on \$1.25 (N200) or even less per day. Specifically, the report revealed that 7% of the 1.2 billion people living below poverty line in the world are Nigerians."¹⁸⁷ Poverty cuts across all manner of differences, including religions and the various categories in which we humans have placed ourselves. Poverty here is only addressed as economy and wealth. There are other areas of poverty beyond economy and money. Jesus, in his teachings, referred to people who are poor in the spirit. In this sense, I can also allude to the poverty of knowledge, health, relationships, and lastly, the poverty of peace, which is burden of the oppressor.

Victimization

In Knitter's words, victimization is the pain resulting not just from being poor, but from being made and kept poor by other human beings.¹⁸⁸ In Nigeria, where according to The Association of Religion Data Archives, 46.5% are now Christians, 45.5% are

¹⁸⁶ Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 137.

¹⁸⁷ The Daily Independent, "World Bank report on poverty in Nigeria, Monday, September 29, 2014. <http://dailyindependentnig.com/2014/05/world-bank-report-poverty-nigeria/>. Accessed September 29, 2014.

¹⁸⁸ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 137.

Muslims, 7.7% adhere to traditional religions and a small number to other religions,¹⁸⁹ massive victimization, being taken advantage of by others, being excluded by others and being overpowered by others continues to persist in our society. This victimization does not exclude the devotees of Christianity; in fact, it is interesting to know that the major tools of victimization include religious texts: the Bible and the Koran. There are two major themes that religious leaders continue to use as a tool for the perpetration of oppression: obedience and submission. These two words are also the platform on which the oppression of women and the poor lies.

Paul Knitter argues that there shouldn't be so much poverty especially because of the earth's bounty; there is "enough to go around," but it doesn't go around because of choices and policies made by those with economic, political and military power.¹⁹⁰ This is a call for Nigerian policy makers to be aware of how their choices continue to favor a minority at the expense of the masses. In Nigeria, for example, an average political leader easily becomes a millionaire due to the misappropriation of constituency allowances. Monetary allowances, which should have been used to provide essential amenities like health care, good roads and education, are misappropriated and shared among the power holders. It is unfortunate that religious authorities and people with spiritual affluence also partake in this exploitation of the masses. In Nigeria, the common trend now is acquisition of private aircrafts, by leaders of mega churches, even though their members are languishing in abject poverty. Among the mainstream churches, the

¹⁸⁹ The Association of Religion Data Archives, "Nigeria: Religious Adherents, 2010 (World Christian Database)," http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_166_2.asp. Accessed September, 29, 2014.

¹⁹⁰ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 137.

vocation of the priesthood has been infected with abuse of power, to the extent that priests are now burdened with the intense need to move up the hierarchy, which in consequence has jeopardized the integrity of ministerial and pastoral calling.

Violence

Poverty and victimization have been described as the context in which physical violence between spouses, social classes, and ethnic group thrives.¹⁹¹ Apart from domestic violence, which affects a significant number of women and youth on a daily basis, Nigeria is currently experiencing a religious crisis for which there seems to be no solution. The opposition between Christianity and Islamic religion has not only been responsible for family and ethnic intolerance, it has also been the source of a religious crisis, which has claimed millions of innocent lives in many countries. In Nigeria alone, Boko Haram, an Islamist movement, which strongly opposes man-made laws and modern science, is known for attacking Christians and bombing churches. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate housed at the University of Maryland, Boko Haram is responsible for 801 attacks and over 3666 deaths.¹⁹² The most recent operation of the Boko Haram was the abduction of over 250 schoolgirls in northern Nigeria.¹⁹³ At the time of writing this thesis, these girls are yet to be recovered.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, *Background Report: Boko Haram Recent Attacks*, May 20014.
http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/STARTBackgroundReport_BokoHaramRecentAttacks_May2014_0.pdf.
Accessed August 26, 2014.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

Many factors contribute to this violence. To start with, both religions are radically monotheistic; this creates intolerance between them. Secondly, they both thrive on patriarchy and its desire to conquer and dominate the other. Thirdly, both religions have fundamentalists who sacralize and justify violence. Regardless, what do we make of all these kinds of incidents when it comes to Jesus' teachings and works? What religion will be proud of all these actions and what does soteriology (salvation) really mean in this situation?

Patriarchy

The last point stressed by Knitters touches on the issues of patriarchy. In my experience as parish priest and marriage counselor, I honestly agree that there is an oppressive patriarchal and hierarchical theme in the Bible, but I equally hold a deep belief in the teachings and works of Jesus Christ as a model for a responsible and non-oppressive leadership. Any Christology that does not discourage oppressive patriarchal systems to me is shortsighted and lacks the integrity of Christ.

Although my agenda for this thesis is women's empowerment and the accountability of men's privileges, this project can equally be applied to all people who are living at the mercy of a patriarchal system: those who are living on the edge of life, people for whom salvation and liberation does not just mean an adherence to a religion but an experience of freedom, love and respect. The intention of this thesis project is to help the voiceless, the powerless and the marginalized. Jesus in his teachings and ministry highly esteemed the poor, and a significant amount of his life and works was

devoted to the oppressed. How then can present-day Christianity and the Church exclude certain people based on their religion, status, gender and class? Where has Christianity lost track of Jesus' mission? The total replacement theology is responsible for this.

Knitter argues that Christian fundamentalists' assumptions are based on the "total replacement theology," which was influenced and founded by Karl Barth (1886-1968), a Swiss theologian and evangelical Christian thinker. This theology denies the presence and revelation of God in any other religion and "looks upon other faith communities as so lacking, or so aberrant, that in the end Christianity must move in and take their place."¹⁹⁴ The consequences of this assertion are evident in our society today, especially in light of the common human sufferings discussed above.

As a priest in an increasingly global world, I, like other concerned Christians, am forced to ask how the Church or Christianity can fulfill the mission of Christ in a world that feels oppressed by the Church's exclusivism. I align myself with the new evangelical protesters who insist "that one cannot follow Jesus without being actively and politically involved in trying to bring justice to the oppressed."¹⁹⁵

While pondering this dilemma, my studies in the course "Christians and Religious Pluralism"¹⁹⁶ challenged me to explore the possibility of Jesus Christ's personality and mission beyond the scope of the Bible. The new evangelical movements which ensued during the 1960s and 1970s refuted the convictions of Christian fundamentalists for two reasons: the first is that this new evangelical view "holds that Fundamentalists have been

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ "Christians and Religious Pluralism" is a seminary course at Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge Massachusetts.

too absolute in insisting on the inerrancy (total lack of error) of the Bible; they therefore recognize that while the scriptures are ‘infallible’ in matters of faith and practice, there may be inaccuracies regarding historical and scientific data.”¹⁹⁷ Secondly, in the mutuality model of Knitter, Raimon Panikkar, one of the pioneers of interreligious dialogue, made a compelling suggestion about the need for transition from what he called a “tribal God.” Panikkar and other Asian theologians suggest that Christians need to refocus their understanding of Jesus. Such a refocusing is necessary because of the way many Christians have made Jesus into a “tribal God”—meant to conquer or subdue all other Gods.¹⁹⁸ Panikkar argues that “to the third Christian millennium is reserved the task of overcoming a tribal Christology by a Christophany which allows Christians to see the work of Christ everywhere without assuming that they have a better grasp on or a monopoly of that mystery which has been revealed to them in a unique way.”¹⁹⁹ To unpack this hypothesis, we must examine the essential ingredients of Panikkar’s “Christophany” (Christo-phany = Christ-appearing) or “authentically universal Christology”—one that allows the Christ to shine forth from all religions without privileging or giving the monopoly to any of them.

Diana Eck, a theologian with specialties in comparative religion, argues that “the imaginative construction of the concept of God is a task for which Christian thinkers and lay people alike have responsibility. It is a task which today must take seriously such issues as the new facts of global interdependence and the new voices of women, the

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

marginalized, and the poor.”²⁰⁰ Further, theologian Gordon Kaufman writes that “Theology is not merely a rehearsal and translation of tradition; it is (and always has been) a creative activity of the human imagination seeking to provide more adequate orientation for human life.”²⁰¹ Therefore, among the urgent tasks of theology today is to confront seriously the challenge of religious pluralism, including the many ways of speaking of the Divine, about gods, about God.²⁰²

Third Space Christology

With all these new voices in mind and with a passion embedded in the liberation of all humanity and especially of women in Africa, I am considering a possibility for a “third-space” Christology, a critical review of the influence of western theology, especially its definitions and epistemology of Christology and how it relates to the liberation of the oppressed.

As already explained in Chapter One, the idea of the metaphorical use of the term “Third World” to convey a “Third Space” in which new ideas can be formulated was described by Kwok Pui-lan as “a space not bound by a binary mindset or dualistic and hierarchical constructions.”²⁰³ This idea of “Third Space” can be adopted by the Church and theological discussion around Christology. A good example of this kind of “third-

²⁰⁰ Eck, Diana L. *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares*. 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 49.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Kwok, *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*, 2.

space Christology” is found in Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman as recorded in the gospel of John.

In this space, Jesus deconstructed the notion of the exclusive nature of worshipping God only in Jerusalem, in the Temple and on a particular mountain. He said to the woman, “Woman,...believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... a time when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:21-24).

In this one encounter, Jesus broke the ancient binary mindset, which contrasts the dwellers in Jerusalem with those in Samaria, and also in this one meeting, Jesus declared his kinship to people all over the world. I am recommending this kind of space and theology for contemporary Christians and people of other religions and cultures so that perhaps we may all attain a more mature Christology.

My construction is of a space or spaces where the manifestations of Christ can shine forth from and within indigenous traditions and cultures. My development for a Christology beyond the scope of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is also informed by the narrative in the book of the Acts of the Apostles where Paul recognized and identified with an indigenous religion as a point of contact for Christology. Although Paul had the original intention of introducing Jesus Christ to the people of Athens, he did not start by condemning the traditions and religions of the people as the western colonial missionaries did to Africans; rather Paul took the people from “the known to unknown.” He identified

and recognized their devotion to religion and to worship and he then made reference to the inscription on their altar of sacrifice.

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.” (Acts 17:22-23)

My point of departure from here is to ask if there could be in every culture and religion a depiction of this “unknown God” which indigenous people have been worshipping in a different way. Is it possible to paint a picture of Jesus, a Christology that is accessible and relevant to indigenous people? Is there a Jesus whom the people have been worshipping in ignorance? Can the Yoruba culture lift up the salvific action of such women as Moremi and the sacrifice of her son, as a selfless and heroic humanitarian symbol, pointing to the teachings and works of Christ?

As I have earlier discussed, in the Yoruba traditional religion, Ifa divination is the representative of Olodumare (God). Although Christian evangelicals and westerners have stereotyped Ifa divination as diabolical, superstitious and primitive, the origin and importance of Ifa divination as emphasized by Olupona in the *City of 201 Gods* cannot be swept under the carpet. I am not proposing that Ifa divination should be equated with or replace Jesus Christ. I am recommending Ifa divination as a significant point of contact for an indigenous Christology. As Ifa revealed the mind of Olodumare, in the myth of Osun, instructing all the male deities to reconcile with the only female deity, Osun, whom they had earlier conspired against, Ifa, if consulted, will remind the Yorubas of such concepts as Omoluwabi and Iwalesin.

Iwa Lesin (Character equals Religion),²⁰⁴ is a Yoruba adage which teaches that the relationship between religion and morality must be balanced. In a paper delivered by Kazeem A. Fayemi and Oladotun J. Ogunkoya, two Yoruba authors, the concept and implication of *Iwa lesin* was theoretically explored. Four possible renditions of the phrase, '*Iwa'lesin*' are identified. The paper rebuts the earlier interpretations of the notion of '*Iwa'lesin*' defended by scholars such as Bolaji Idowu, Moses Makinde and Wande Abimbola in terms of: identity - '*Iwa ni esin*' (existence is religion), admonition - '*Iwa ni esin*' (existence is commitment), and prescription - '*Iwa ni esin*' (good character entails commitment). The principle of *Iwa ni esin* is the notion depicting good character as the basis of religion. Jesus Christ voiced this same principle when he challenged the authorities of his day that the law was made for humans and not the other way around. A reminder about the concept of *Iwa lesin* and such other Yoruba ontological concepts such as Omoluwabi are enough to emancipate women from oppressive patriarchy, if reviewed and practiced at all levels.

In his introduction to *The Many Faces of Christology*, Tyron Inbody discusses the epistemology of Christ in contrast to purely historical details; he states that the epistemology of Christology is not just about Jesus of Nazareth but about what Jesus stands for.²⁰⁵ It is not about the Church or Christianity but more of what Christ came to achieve: human liberation and reconciliation to God and to one another. This is where the Church will have to review and reconsider its mission in the light of the present

²⁰⁴ A. Kazeem Fayemi and J. Oladotun Ogunkoya, "The Concept of '*Iwa'lesin*' in Yoruba Thought: Implications for Development in Nigeria," *Amoye Journal of African Philosophy and Studies*, <http://amoye-journal.gnbo.com.ng/Current+Issues> (accessed August 12, 2014).

²⁰⁵ Tyron Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 9.

challenges facing its faith beliefs and claims. If the Church continues to raise the walls of separation, walls which had been pulled down by Christ's death and blood, then the Church is mistaken and is working contrary to the mission of Christ.

One of the proposals against the fundamentalists' total replacement model earlier discussed is the mutuality model. According to Knitter, the proponents of the mutuality model argue that "followers of Jesus would be better off if they understood (and felt) Jesus more as a sacrament of God's love than a satisfaction for God's justice."²⁰⁶ I would rather have Jesus seen as both a sacrament and a sacrifice, but for the purpose of this thesis project and for the mutual co-existence of humanity, I want to emphasize Jesus as the sacrament of God's love.

As described by Knitter, sacraments are powerful because they tell us something, and make us feel something that is already there but perhaps not yet as present and active in our lives as it could be. A sacrament reveals and points to something deeper and higher and beyond itself. Thus, if a sacrament is the outward visible sign of an inward and invisible grace or God's empowering presence, how Jesus related with women and the outcast is instructive to the Church's ministry of liberation. Jesus as a revealer of God's love is the loving brother of all creation and women in particular. This love was not recently created; it is the same love that has been in existence since the beginning of creation.

²⁰⁶ Knitter, Paul F. *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 152.

Several of John's gospel narratives give us examples of the sacramental life of Jesus in the following passages:

- **The Bread of Life:** Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." John 6:35
- **The Good Shepherd:** I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. John 10:11
- **The Door:** I am the door, if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. John 10:9
- **The Light:** Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8:12
- **The Way:** Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." John 14: 6.

Jesus the Lion and the Lamb

In this light, I would like to present Jesus as both the Lion and the Lamb, the two figures which I will use to represent the present relationship between Christianity and the rest of the world. These two symbols also express God's final vision of the relationship between men and women, the oppressors and the oppressed.

In Jesus, all of humanity, irrespective of religion, culture and tradition, are reunited with God. A blend of firmness and compassion was demonstrated in Jesus as he confronted the religionists of his days and yet he was gentle and tender with women, the

poor and the marginalized as he worked and walked the journey of liberation for them and with them.

As Knitter says, it is within this context of seeing Jesus as a sacrament, especially as both the Lion and the Lamb, that “Jesus’ followers will be able to hold tight to what he means to them and at the same time, to recognize what God may be saying in other traditions.”²⁰⁷

Inferring from the stories narrated at the beginning of this thesis, it is obvious that the problem of both the men (oppressor) and the women (oppressed) is the ideologies, the institutions and individual perceptions of women. These stereotypes form the basis of the systems, institutions, culture, laws, religion and patriarchy that empower men and make women inferior and subordinate. At present, the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors is characterized by fear and suspicion. However, Isaiah prophesied that a time would come when the Lion and the Lamb would dwell together without fear or cruelty.

To give room for this kind of relationship, we must create the space described above as a “third space.” I found my own voice in Homi Bhabha’s description of this “Third Space” as the in-between space, which questions established categorizations of culture and identity and opens up the possibilities of renegotiating power and creating new cultural meanings.²⁰⁸ A better understanding of this space is the term “liminal space.” Liminality is a postmodern notion which, according to Richard Rohr, describes a

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 153.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them.²⁰⁹

It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run...anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.²¹⁰

I am proposing that this “Third Space” be adopted by the Church and every society, especially my Yoruba culture. This in-between space, especially as it applies to the oppression of women, will not be controlled by the dictates of the oppressed (women) nor of the oppressors (men). This is the space where power and powerlessness can be held together in a sacred manner and where the Lion can dwell with the Lamb without fear or domination. The birth of this kind of space, which is aimed at the liberation of women and men of my community, was conceived about twenty years ago in a vision project called The Voice, which I will describe in the following chapter.

²⁰⁹ Richard Rohr, "Liminal Space," Liminal Space, <http://inaliminalspace.com/about/what> (accessed August 18, 2014).

²¹⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LION CAN BE FRIEND WITH THE LAMB

If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other. ~ Mother Teresa

The Voice project was conceived in 1994, as a dream on the mandate from the prophesy in Isaiah 40:1-5.²¹¹ It came with the understanding that there is an imbalance within human relationships: between men and women, leaders and followers, church and the world, the rich and the poor, people at the top of hierarchy and those at the base. As shown at the beginning of this thesis, in the metaphorical description of the happy and the unhappy people with the happiness machine, *The Voice* project understands both the pain of those at the receiving end, in this context, women, and at the same time, the fear and insecurity of those who seem to be enjoying power, men.

As exemplified in the prophesy of Isaiah, the God who made the mountains and hills is also the same God of the valleys and low lands. The goal of *The Voice* is therefore to alleviate the pain of the oppressed and at the same time remove the fear of the oppressor, through the Church's participation in dismantling the concept of oppression. *The Voice* strives for equal human dignity for both women and men and works with men to

²¹¹Isaiah 40:2-3. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." Isaiah 40:1-5.

relinquish their privilege to oppress and use it to empower women. *The Voice* will accomplish this goal with three main objectives listed below.

Exposing the Power of Deception and Oppression

The Voice will make use of both online resources such as Facebook, Skype, emails, newsletters and online videos to speak out and raise awareness of the evils of oppression. *The Voice* will use every opportunity in on-site resources such as Bible studies, small group meetings, the pulpit, family meetings, prayer meetings, women's circles and men's meetings to facilitate conversations around the effect of women's oppression in our society. *The Voice* seeks to break down the barriers that make it difficult for individual unique human voices to be heard and to be known. For these reasons, *The Voice* will work with organizations, individuals and families in creating awareness about the ways in which men have been victimizing themselves by being oppressive to women and children.

Building Bridges and Demolishing Walls

The Voice will serve as the in-between space for dialogue, interaction, reconciliation and contemplation (liminal waiting), for individuals, groups and families who have long been separated by traditional walls of gender, race, culture, theology, faith, color, language, class, religion and region. Starting with the relationship between the three religions in the Yoruba community, Yoruba Traditional religion, Christianity and Islam, *The Voice* will facilitate conversation around the common grounds of

suffering as highlighted by Knitters and their effect on the Yoruba community. We will organize small groups, family, women's and men's meetings to intentionally discuss how poverty, victimization, violence, and patriarchy have torn the fabric of our community apart. *The Voice* will seek ways and means for each religious group to go back and examine their original tenets of faith and perhaps see their own deviations from the purpose of God. We hope that this might spark some interest in the devotees of Yoruba traditional religion in listening to voices like the *Osetura*²¹² in Ifa Divination. This may awaken and assist a Yoruba man or woman in being transformed by the concepts and exploration of *Omoluwabi*²¹³ and to practice living *Iwalesin*.²¹⁴ These meetings will remind Christian men and women of the words of Christ that "whatever you wish that men [women] would do to you, do so to them."²¹⁵ The meetings will remind a devout Muslim that "Not one of you is a believer until he [she] loves for his [her] brother [sister] what he [she] loves for himself [herself]."²¹⁶ As I have done here, transformation begins even by a small, but significant action such as using gender inclusive language. It is in knowing these foundational truths that the walls of separation and oppression will be demolished. Only on this foundation can bias and oppressive scriptures, laws, and cultures be deconstructed. It is in this space where the true worshipers will worship God,

²¹² Badejo, *Osun Seegesi : The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power, and Femininity*; Adeniji-Neill, *Omoluabi: The Way of Human being: An African Philosophy's Impact on Nigerian Voluntary Immigrants' Educational and Other Life Aspirations*, 1.

²¹³ Dolapo Adeniji-Neill, "Omoluabi: The Way of Human Being: An African Philosophy's Impact on Nigerian Voluntary Immigrants' Educational and Other Life Aspirations," *Adelphi University* (Ruth S. Ammon School of Education Garden City, NY), 1.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Andrew Wilson, "The Golden Rule," *World Scripture, A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*. International Religious Foundation, 1991, <http://www.unification.net/ws/theme015.htm> (accessed August 11, 2014).

²¹⁶ Ibid.

neither on a mountain nor in a valley, but in respecting human dignity, justice, truth and love.²¹⁷ It is in such a space where the Lion can lie down in his or her majesty and where the Lamb can graze beautifully without any fear of violence.

Helping People to Claim Who They Are in All Their Beauty and Ashes

Through the use of intentional listening, seminars, workshops, prayers, storytelling, faith sharing, thought processing, self-awareness, creating a safe space for the free expression of joy and pains, and the permission for a free flow of tears without shame, *The Voice* will help people to “claim their weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light.”²¹⁸ As Palmer has said, “to be whole means to reject none of these but to embrace all of it.”²¹⁹ It is within the context of truly claiming who we are and practicing that in everyday living that men can admit their ignorance, misuse of their power and fear of women, which according to Raoul and Currie has resulted in the domination of the later. It is in this claim that men can learn that infertility or barrenness can be equally shared in marriage and that these things are not exclusively for women. Moreover, a husband and wife can adopt and raise orphaned children as their own in the joy of helping forgotten children “to have life, and have it abundantly.”²²⁰ The loss of infertility for both women and men can bring the joy of a different possibility. As *The Voice* creates this atmosphere, which encourages vulnerability, men will have the

²¹⁷ John 4:21-24

²¹⁸ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 70.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ John 10:10.

permission to claim their own weaknesses and pains, by publicly or privately allowing the free flow of tears, which can bring them in touch with reality.

As I have shown in the last four chapters, the reality of women's oppression emanated from wrong ideologies about women by men, beginning theologically with Adam. These ideologies have culminated in the labeling of women's experience as subordinate and inferior to that of men. These ideologies have been systematically woven into our laws, cultural practices and family institutions; they have been made sacred. Therefore the first and foremost goal of *The Voice* project is to encourage men's and women's interest in taking the journey to truly know and be known. The first step in this adventure is the willingness to be vulnerable.

Overcoming the Fear of Unknown

In Chapter Two, I underscored the cause of men's domination over women as rooted in the fear of "the unknown" in women; this fear can be true for women as well. One solution to alleviating men's fear of the "unknown" is to develop another counter-desire, which aspires to truly know women as they are. This kind of desire will not label, name, generalize or assume. Unlike the first Adam who gave names to everything, the Adam of the 21st century must cease to give names and rather listen. This Adam must make use of his ears rather than his mouth. This Adam must be comfortable with not naming but experiencing. Carl Rogers, a specialist in the field of humanistic psychology, defines this new desire as an empathic way of being with the other:

It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment,

to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever he or she is experiencing.²²¹

Rogers said that “to be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another's world without prejudice.”²²² This kind of desire will not only help men to truly have a perspective on women’s world, it will also open men’s eyes to the evils of oppression. Within the context of this knowing, women can also begin to remember who they are in contrast to what they have been called. To know and be truly known will help us to see how we have all derailed the original purpose of God, both in religion and society. This kind of knowing is necessary for both men and women. However, Rogers warned that since this kind of adventure may mean laying oneself aside, and it can only be done by persons who “are secure enough in themselves that they know they will not get lost in what may turn out to be the strange or bizarre world of the other, and that they can comfortably return to their own world when they wish.”²²³

To help facilitate this process, *The Voice* hopes to create a space of belonging for individuals, groups, men and women with emphasis on transparency and interdependency as major central components of healing and wholeness. *The Voice* project will hold at its very core such concepts as the importance of Self-awareness, the power of vulnerability, dialogue, storytelling and scriptures. *The Voice* will encourage small group discussions

²²¹ Carl R. Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 142.

²²² Ibid., 143.

²²³ Ibid.

such as men's camp meetings and women's circles. To begin with, I will lay some emphasis on the importance of self-awareness and the power of vulnerability.

The Blessing of Vulnerability

In her talk on the "Power of Vulnerability," Brene Brown speaks of vulnerability as not only the core of our shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, but also the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging and love.²²⁴ The willingness to be vulnerable is a major requirement for the possibility of mutuality in the metaphor of the lion (men) to become friends with the lamb (women). The oppressors must be willing to step down. The oppressed must be ready to step up and both must be willing to meet somewhere outside their comfort zone; this is the invitation to this Third Space Christology. Yoruba Christian women and men need to admit both their strengths and weaknesses, and then come to terms with that which makes for a peaceful coexistence. Brown describes those who have the courage to come to this "third space" as not talking of vulnerability as being comfortable, nor talking about it as being excruciating--they just talk about it as being necessary.²²⁵ This Third Space Christology, which teaches respect for equal human dignity, is necessary if the Yoruba Christian communal life is to survive. Vulnerability makes possible deeply knowing and being truly known; it is when we are truly known that the beauty of self-awareness can thrive.

²²⁴ Brene Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability," https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability (accessed August/11, 2014).

²²⁵ *ibid*

Self-Awareness

I believe that lack of self-awareness is directly linked to the experience of oppression. An awareness of self will lead to self-esteem. In contrast, the lack of self-awareness will usually lead to fear, insecurity and the need to be defensive or to oppress others. All genders, all oppressed and oppressors have the need to answer the question “Who am I?” Carl Rogers claims that “behind the trouble with studies, or wife, husband or employer, or with our uncontrollable or bizarre behavior, or with our frightening feelings, lays one central search, the search for self.”²²⁶ Rogers said it seemed to him that at the bottom each person is asking: “Who am I, really? How can I get in touch with this real self, underlying all my surface behavior? How can I become myself?”²²⁷

One of the most serious problems with our society is that we have all allowed others to define who we are. Men have labeled women with all sorts of stereotypes based on their perspectives of women. Women have accepted men’s claim because women don’t really know who they are or perhaps the years of oppression have made them to forget their real identity. So, like the first woman Eve, they just accept what they have been labeled with. Unfortunately like Adam, we are all experts in naming. However, until we define who we are, we cannot experience total liberation and humanization.

Self-awareness does not displace feedback and counseling when they are necessary; nevertheless, I am optimistic that confronting our own fears and embracing

²²⁶Carl, Rogers, “What It Means to Become A Person.” In *The Self; Explorations In Personal Growth*. ed. Clark E. Moustakas (New York: Harpers, 1956), 196.

²²⁷ Ibid.

our “shadows”²²⁸ will enhance healing and wholeness. Parker Palmer, whose work focuses on community and social change, when reflecting on his life said that he finally knew himself to be a person of weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light.²²⁹ Palmer said, “I now know that to be whole means to reject none of it but to embrace all of it.”²³⁰

A true self-awareness will require a filtering of all that we have been called, all that we feared, and all that we dared not talk about. It will require an intentional listening to self, others and God. This exercise will help men and women in my community to honestly ask themselves some uncomfortable questions, which can only be rightly answered individually. This exercise will help individuals to challenge assumptions, stereotypes and ideologies, which have been used to promote prejudice and oppression. It will help individuals, both male and female, oppressors and the oppressed to be in touch with their own joys and sufferings and then be able to relate in appropriate ways to others. *The Voice* project will help individuals to achieve this by posing some of these questions on *The Voice's* website.²³¹ It is within the context of deeply knowing and being truly known that *The Voice* is also calling for a safe space of storytelling.

²²⁸ In Jung's theory, our shadow is an archetype described as having the deepest roots. It is the most dangerous and powerful of the archetypes. It represents our dark side, the thoughts, feelings, and actions that we tend to disown by projecting them outward. Corey, Gerald. *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole Pub. Co, 1996) 74.

²²⁹ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 70.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Moses Sowale, "The Voice," The Voice of The One Crying in the Wilderness, <http://thevoicef.org/> (accessed August, 2014).

The Power of Storytelling

For the possibility of cultural critique, Kanyoro raised the importance of creating a safe space where mutual trust and the transparent vulnerability of all participants can be honored.²³² This is necessary especially in sharing women's experiences of oppression. Without the sharing of personal experiences, it will be difficult to understand and analyze the various effects of oppressive cultural practices in a context where there are divided views over what is right and what is wrong. *The Voice* understands this "safe space" of vulnerability as a space for the sharing and retelling of individual stories, especially as they arise from oppressive cultural practices. A good example of this was the different testimonies on female circumcision by two university-educated women in Mali, which was narrated by Musibik Kanyoro.

Case 1 (thirty-five years old, working in a government department); I had just turned 12 when I was excised. The excisor was an old woman belonging to the blacksmiths' caste. Here in Mali, it is usually women of this caste who practice ablation of the clitoris and infibulation. On the threshold of the hut, my aunts exchanged the customary greetings and left me in the hands of the excisor ... Once I was inside; the women began to sing my praises, to which I turned a deaf ear, as I was overcome with terror... "Lie down," the excisor suddenly said to me. Two women on each side of me pinned me to the ground... First I underwent the ablation of the labia minora, and then of the clitoris... It was a rule that the girls of my age did not weep in this situation. I broke a rule.... I was bleeding. The blood flowed in torrents. Then they applied a mixture of butter and medicinal herbs which stopped the bleeding. Never had I felt such excruciating pain. After this, the women let go their grasp, freeing my mutilated body.... "You can stand up now".... Then they forced me, not only to walk back to join the other girls who had already been excised, but to dance with them.... It was months before I was completely well.... Everyone mocked me as I hadn't been brave, they said.

²³² Musimbi Kanyoro, R. A. "Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, 101-13.

Case 2: (Twenty-six years old, divorced with one child):

I was excised as a child....I am talking about my personal experience. Today I am happy I had the excision operation....It has fulfilled its function as far as I am concern. I've been divorced for four years and I've never for one moment felt the desire to run after a man, or felt the absence of sexual relations....to be a vital lack. That indicates to some extent the function of excision... It allows a woman to be in control of her own body. And that is why I don't in any way consider it as a mutilation. In fact it boils down to what the intention is, and with them, it isn't to mutilate.²³³

This space will be an avenue to lift up the faces of oppression not only to men but also to women who have become perpetrators in the name of loyalty to culture and religion. In these narratives one woman was actually thankful for the liberating gain of what was initially a painful and oppressive experience. The other woman considered female circumcision an excruciating and oppressive experience. Hence Kanyoro argues that cultural ideologies regarding gender roles and power in society, and even on issues of violence and on how male power over women is maintained, are deeply embedded in our lived experience.²³⁴ It is not easy for African women to agree jointly to condemn men.²³⁵ It is therefore necessary to understand the kind of liberation desired by some of the women in this context; some African women “reason that they want a future in which men are friends and building that future does not begin by attacking men but by finding methods of bringing change together with them.”²³⁶

Therefore in order to empower women in this context, one may have to think of what constitutes the most basic needs of women in order to live as fully human persons

²³³ Ibid., 109.

²³⁴ Ibid., 107.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

beginning with physical safety, shelter, food, and the means and skills to sufficiently feed themselves and their families. In my understanding of women's ideal, it is the pride of a significant percentage of African women to have a husband, one whom they can adore and share life with. African women take joy in their ability to nurture, in this context, to nurture their men, children and their community. African women are asking for the same kind of respect, nurturing and protection from their men. It is true that this might be categorized as an internalized system of oppression; however it is the reality of this continent. It is obvious to me that the absence of a loving, respectful and honorable man in the life of an African woman leaves her vulnerable to all forms of societal and emotional oppressions. This is not only for women; a miserable life also awaits an African man without a wife. In the reality of this continent the vast number of men and women cannot do without each other. *The Voice* is asking for dialogue and change so this reality is a much more positive experience born out of social acceptance, legal, educational, religious acceptance of women as full human beings. Then marriage can be entered into joyfully for all the just and right reasons.

The Power of Dialogue

The importance of dialogue among people of differing views in a community cannot be overemphasized in finding answers to questions of co-existence. Wesley Ariarajah, in *Not Without My Neighbor* has insisted that "dialogue should not be seen as

an ambulance service; it is a public health program!”²³⁷ Men and women or people with differing views in any community need not wait until crisis or conflict compels them to come together for a dialogue. In fact, Ariarajah says, “Attempting to promote dialogue or intercommunal, interfaith harmony during or soon after a conflict, though it has its own limited value, is a frustrating exercise.”²³⁸ We should not view dialogue just as a means of resolving conflicts, but as a way of building a community of conversation, a “community of heart and mind” across racial, ethnic, and religious barriers where people learn to see differences among them not as threatening but as “natural” and “normal.”²³⁹ Ariarajah concluded that:

Dialogue thus is an attempt to help people to understand and accept the other in their “otherness.” And that dialogue seeks to make people “at home” with plurality, to develop an appreciation of diversity, and to make those links that may just help hold together when the whole community is threatened by forces of separation and anarchy.²⁴⁰

The Voice will make use of all avenues including social media networks and onsite workshops to facilitate such a platform for dialogue between men and women. We may not see the necessity for dialogue until we all begin to admit our chaos and the effect of oppression on all. Going back to the story narrated in Chapter One of this thesis, both the happy people and the unhappy people are experiencing turbulence due to the dross produced by the happy machine and the earlier they come together to have one voice, the better. The one voice that we need in this context is not a voice against men or women, but a voice against the evil of oppression. Lastly, *The Voice* will add one more approach:

²³⁷ Ariarajah, S. Wesley, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 12.

²³⁸ Ibid., 13.

²³⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

group meetings. There will be groups for men, women, youth, married, young adults, aged etc. For the purpose of this thesis project, I will lay more emphasis on the men's group.

Men's Group

In the past, women's emancipation programs have only involved females, but in the end these have little or no effect since the group perpetuating oppression—husbands and fathers—are not involved. Since women's oppression and its consequences affect not only women but the entire society, it is appropriate to apply the usual way of solving communal crises in African society: the calling of men to a camp meeting. In the context of this meeting *The Voice* will organize lectures, workshops and seminars which will center on appealing to men's conscience and opening the eyes of men to this societal problem. Men will also be made to know the unearned privileges they have been enjoying right from birth, e.g., the celebration of their birth, the right to control women, the right to be chosen over women, the right never to be blamed for any shortcomings involving them and their wives, the right to marry as many women and cheat on your wives without any blame etc. Men at such meetings will decide if they want to continue with such dehumanization of life. *The Voice* will facilitate conversation around the accountability of such privileges as inheritance, leadership, fatherhood and kingship. These are responsibilities that can as well be shared by women, but have been exclusively given to men in this society. Men will deliberate on questions such as: how can male privileges be used to empower rather than to oppress? How can men use their privileges

to pave the way for women so that they too can have equal access to resources and positions? What will it look like to have a community of equal human dignity?

Concluding with the story of the happiness machine, I am not advocating for the dismantling of this machine, I am asking that both the happy and the unhappy people can have equal access to the happiness machine. I am not asking for the displacement of Yoruba Christian men and their roles but I am asking that men relinquish the power that oppresses and that women be given the opportunity to be human. I am asking our girls have access to the same opportunity for education as our boys. I am asking that the Church fathers will, like Christ, open wide their arms and let women attain the position of priesthood, leadership as well as servanthood. I am asking politicians at the three tiers of government not to be afraid of allowing women to lead us. We may have much to learn from their style of leadership and their feminine wisdom. I will conclude this thesis with a Yoruba proverb which says, *agbajo owo la fin so 'ya; ajeji owo kan ko gberu d' ori*: “success can only be achieved with joined hands.”

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